READING'S EFFECT – A NOVEL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The effect that fiction has on readers has been continuously debated since at least the fourth century B.C.E. In this dissertation, I first analyze historic arguments of philosophers and critics who have participated significantly in the debate. I organize their critical judgments about reading's effects into three categories—*useful*, *detrimental* and *nonaffective*. The *useful* fiction claim is that reading fiction influences readers toward beneficial change. The opposite claim is that reading produces a variety of *detrimental* effects—it deceives, inflames, coerces or develops false expectations. At the root of this argument is the idea that fiction appeals to the emotions, therefore, reason and good judgment are suppressed. The third broad category of argument suggests that literature is simply art and has only an aesthetic effect. I explore only the *useful* and *detrimental* possibilities in this research. I apply Joshua Landy's critical perspective that novels are primarily *formative* rather than informative to interrogate ideas about private reading that British women authors explore in their novels from the mid-eighteenth century through the early nineteenth century. During that period, the idea that novels might be formative—beneficial and educational—is argued *within* the narratives and dialog of their novels. I evaluate and describe the critical interrogative work that Charlotte Lennox (*The Female Quixote*), Maria Edgeworth (*Belinda*), Jane Austen (*Northanger Abbey*) and Sarah Green (*Scotch Novel Reading*) perform using their novels as a platform to consider ideas about women, education and particularly, the potentially *positive* effects of novel

reading. Drawing on threads of theory as ancient as Plato's and Quintilian's and ideas about novels as recent as Huet's and Johnson's, I analyze how these authors use their novels to discuss reader maturation and character development. In their novels, they weave reader development, critical analysis and social critique into narratives about complex characters. I examine in new ways the questions of fiction's effect, reader response and authorial influence. I conclude that novel reading has primarily a positive, formative effect. Consequently, there is potential to use novel reading with university students to help improve decision making and point to issues of character development.

To Frank Langer, with fond memories; my high school Latin teacher,

who inspired me to a life-long pursuit of intellectual curiosity.

Books have always a secret influence on the understanding; we cannot at pleasure obliterate ideas; he that reads books of science, though without any fixed desire of improvement, will grow more knowing; he that entertains himself with moral or religious treatises, will imperceptibly advance in goodness; the ideas which are often offered to the mind, will at last find a lucky moment when it is disposed to receive them.

Samuel Johnson *Adventurer No. 137- Writers Not a Useless Generation*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT……..…….iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS…….…..…ix

Chapters

1 INTRODUCTION - A CONTINUING ARGUMENT……...1

Categories of Effect…….1
Another Perspective…….5
Interrogating Novels……7
A Historical Debate…….……7
An Eighteenth-Century Perspective…….……..17
The Novelists Engage the Argument…….23
References……..……31

2 *THE FEMALE QUIXOTE* – ISOLATED READING'S EFFECTS……..…….33

Introduction……...…….33
Response to Contemporary Ideas……...38
Modern Assessments of *The Female Quixote*……...40
Organization and Issues…….44
Conditions Affecting Reading……...55
Ascent toward Better Reading……...59
End and Continuation……72
References……..74

3 *BELINDA* – THE LIMITS OF IMAGINATION……..…..76

Introduction……76
One Character to Resolve Them All……..85
Belinda's Mind……...87
Lady Delacour's Breast……..93
Virginia's Books……..102
Sophisticated Reader Transmission…….105
References……....109

4 *NORTHANGER ABBEY* – SORTING AMBIGUITY; DEVELOPING THE MIND..111

Introduction……..…111
Reader Development……...114
Looking Inside…….……124
Catherine Learns to Reflect…….……....126
Deciphering Ambiguity…….……..132
Dénouement at Northanger Abbey…….……142
Conclusions……146
Appendix…….…….……...149
References…….……..151

5 *SCOTCH NOVEL READING* – REALITY'S LIMITS ON IMAGINATIVE READING…….…..153

Introduction…….……153
Dangerous, Disruptive of Developmental…….……...155
A Mild Quixote……158
Alice's Adventures in Romance-land……..161
An Assault on Imagination……..171
Reading's Effects – A Final Word…….….174
References……...177

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: A CONTINUING ARGUMENT

Categories of Effect

The effect fiction has on readers has been continuously debated since at least the fourth century B.C.E. and probably long before that. Mark Edmundson calls it an "ancient quarrel."[1] For the purpose of this dissertation, Plato's ideas are an adequate initial reference. In this chapter, I analyze the historic arguments of philosophers, authors and critics who have participated significantly in this debate. I organize their critical judgments about reading's effects into three categories—*useful*, *detrimental* and *non-affective*. Most critical analysis of reading's effect fits into one of these three.

The *useful* fiction claim is that reading fiction influences readers toward growth and beneficial change. The opposite claim is that reading produces various *detrimental* effects—it deceives, inflames, coerces or develops false expectations. At the root of this argument is the idea that fiction appeals to the emotions; when that occurs, reason and good judgment are suppressed. The third broad category of the argument suggests that literature is simply art and has only an aesthetic effect. Therefore, it does not *do* anything nor does it cause readers to *do* anything. These critics argue that fiction may elicit

[1] Mark Edmundson writes in *Literature against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida* that this quarrel between poets and philosophers was considered already ancient in Plato's time. Most current critical texts that trace the role and dangers of fiction begin with Plato's ideas. Earlier texts must be assumed because of Plato's comments, but they are not available.

admiration for its aesthetic qualities, but it has no power to enact change in readers—positive or negative.

Useful Fiction

Martha Nussbaum is a well-known proponent of the *usefulness* of fiction argument. She contends that "The experience of readership is a moral activity in its own right, a cultivation of imagination for moral activity in life, and a test for correctness of real-life judgment and response" (*Love's Knowledge* 339). Nussbaum cites David Copperfield's [2] reflections about reading, "When I think of it, the picture always rises in my mind, of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, *reading as if for life*" (*Love's Knowledge* 230). Nussbaum and others in this group argue emphatically that, when we read fiction, the mental and emotional processes that occur, while reading, prepare us for life. About this reflective moment in *David Copperfield*, Nussbaum stresses, "It tells us clearly how powerful novel-reading is in and for life, how surely it forms the life of fantasy, how surely fantasy shapes, for good or ill, the reader's relations with the world" (*Love's Knowledge* 354). Nussbaum is not alone in this argument. Cristina Bruns comments, "Other scholars also share this concern, as is evident by the number of works published in the last decade on the subject of the value of literature" (2). She lists a small sampling of recent texts that explore the positive benefit of reading.[3] It is evident that the argument about reading's beneficial and developmental

[2] From the novel of the same name – *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens (1849-50).

[3] Brun's short list includes: Glen C. Arbery's *Why Literature Matters*, Mark Edmundson's *Why Read?*, Frank Farrell's *Why Does Literature Matter?*, Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature*, Mark William Roche's *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, Daniel R. Schwartz's *In Defense of Reading*, Dennis Sumara's *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters*, and Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction*. To Brun's list I add similar books, including Philip Davis's *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters*, Harold Bloom's *How to*

effects remains a significant subject of debate among modern scholars. Significantly, the PMLA dedicated the entire theories and methodologies section in the May 2015 volume to the topic of reading. Most of these texts suggest that reading fictions creates a mental framework that resembles life. As readers enter into the fictional framework and share adventures with the fictional characters, they learn from either the explicit dialog or from the exemplary characters. I call this view the *Life-Simulator* effect of reading fiction.

Detrimental Fiction

Peter Thorpe argues against the dangers of reading in his *Why Literature is Bad for You*. Thorpe concludes there is much to be feared from reading fiction:

> The evil that literary art can do is compounded by the subtlety of artistic language. A well-written novel, poem, or play has a way of giving the illusion that we're making intellectual, spiritual, and emotional progress rather than giving us the real thing. We feel as though we've really gotten someplace when in fact we've either stood still of slipped back…Deep in the basic nature of art there seems to be a force which in its effects is manipulative and conspiring. To investigate and understand this force is to begin to see how the "humanities" dehumanize. (xii)

Thorpe suggests that we not abandon the study of literature; rather, we should examine it as if it were a disease-causing germ that can be thwarted if understood thoroughly. This view of literature is the extreme, even in its own category of those who see fiction reading's detrimental effects. However, it is one that captures and recapitulates equally enthusiastic arguments that were made during the period of early development of the novel in Great Britain.[4] Another branch of this argument of fiction-as-detrimental flows

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Read and Why, George Levine's *How to Read the Victorian Novel* and Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration*. Rosenblatt's book was published in 1938 and continues to contribute to this argument.

[4] Cheryl L. Nixon in her *Anthology of Commentary on the Novel 1688-1815* includes over 30 pages of excerpts from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critics who condemn the powerful negative effect of novel reading.

from Michel Foucault's assessment of socially enforcing instruments. D. A. Miller adopts Foucault's argument and asks, "How does the novel—as a set of representational techniques—systematically participate in a general economy of policing power (2)? These critics suggest that novels are coercive and should be read with suspicion and resistance. I call this critical view *Fiction is Poison*.

Nonaffective Fiction

Somerset Maugham expresses succinctly the third argument—art has no effect, nor should we look for any. He states, "For the novel, I can never repeat too often, is not to be looked upon as a medium of instruction or edification, but as a source of intelligent diversion" (49). Maugham's acknowledgement that he needs to repeat his assessment *often* suggests that he is aware of the predominance of the other two arguments. My study of the historical arguments for and against reading fiction suggests that Maugham's argument is a recent and less frequent one. Maugham attempts to minimize the historic antagonism between fiction's imagined benefit and its dreaded influence. Maugham's is an argument that attempts to disengage from the poles of the controversy. This argument denies that reading fiction has emotional or intellectual benefit; it simply entertains. Though advocates of the two antagonistic poles cannot agree whether reading fiction is clearly beneficial or detrimental, most of them at least agree that it has the potential to influence readers in *some* way. Consequently, the fiction-as-powerless view is one that I will not address in my arguments, except to say briefly here that it is one that seems to be contrary to most critical theory and the experience of reading described by many ancient and modern philosophers, authors and critics.

Another Perspective

Having reduced my analytical categories to two—reading fiction expands our experience and improves our lives; or contrarily, reading fiction diminishes or misdirects our lives—I overlay another set of analytical concepts that directly interact with my categories. Joshua Landy's *How to Do Things with Fictions* presents a comprehensive taxonomy of twelve ways we think about fiction's effect, and organizes them into three categories—*exemplary*, *affective* and *cognitive*. These are pathways into our subjective self through which reading exerts influence. They are associated with conscience, the emotions and the mind. Landy critiques important claims of each of these categories and introduces a fourth category of effect—*formative*. He argues that the most important and enduring work of texts is to fine-tune our mental capacities. He suggests that what we assimilate easily through the exemplary, affective and cognitive influence of fictions, but those effects are not enduring. What remains and shapes us permanently are the difficult ideas and ambiguities that we must decipher. He explains:

> Rather than providing knowledge *per se*—whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation—what they give us is *know-how*; rather than transmitting beliefs, what they equip us with are *skills*; rather than teaching, what they do is *train*. They are not informative, that is, but formative. They present themselves as spiritual exercises (whether sacred or profane), spaces for prolonged and active encounters that serve over time to hone our abilities and thus, in the end, to help us become who we are. (10)

A derivative claim that Landy makes is that "Unlike certain theories of fiction, then, which consider its effects to be automatic, inevitable, inescapable … formative fictions never force themselves upon us. Without our active participation, they will not do their work" (13). These two mutually dependent claims—some texts are formative, but they

are not coercive—set Landy's formulation apart from the three categories he describes and dismantles. He does not argue that the three ways of theorizing literature's impact are useless; rather, he demonstrates that they are not always supported by close reading of texts. He argues against the idea that "The salutary effect on readers is…automatic, inevitable—as though novels were so many bricks with which to hit recalcitrant unbelievers over the head, in hopes of shaking their skepticism loose" (30). He concludes, "However tempted we are to use purportedly 'improving' novels as electrodes with which to jolt the misfiring neurons of the benighted, we should remember that those works which try hardest to change us are those which succeed the least" (38).

If Landy is right, and I agree with much of his argument, then the focus on the opposing extremes of reading's good or bad effects largely misses the greater work of novels, which is the formation of rational capacities and critical discernment. While I agree with Landy's focus on reading's formative capacities, I do not agree that he has discovered a heretofore *unknown* conception of reading's effect. I argue that these aspirations for reading to develop us as sophisticated critical thinkers have been proposed by previous philosophers and critics. The *good-book = good-person* and the *bad-book = bad-person* arguments have received more critical attention, but there have been other philosophers, critics and authors who have pointed to reading's formative effect that Landy claims is new. Additionally, Landy's argument positions itself very close to the reading-fiction-is-beneficial argument.[5] I suggest that Landy's theory is a useful hybrid—

[5] Two important aspects of Landy's theory are mentioned here as caveats. First, Landy's choice of analytical texts are not primarily novels. He suggests that many kinds of texts in addition to novels perform the formative work. In their ambiguity, complexity and impenetrability, they instigate critical thinking and deeper understanding of what is meant below the surface of what is said. Second, Landy does not entirely refute all of the other arguments about reading's effect. He states, "There is no shortage of fictions to prove almost every theory right" (8). Then he narrows his field of supporting texts saying, "There is…a set of texts that we might label 'formative fictions,' texts whose function it is to fine-tune our mental capacities"

he argues that reading fiction may be beneficial, if the reader interacts with the text in a sophisticated and interrogative way.

Interrogating Novels

Of particular interest to me is the utility of Landy's premise to interrogate ideas about reading that British women authors explore in their novels from the mid-eighteenth century through the early nineteenth century. During that period, the idea that novels might be formative—beneficial and educational—is argued *within* the narrative and the dialog of the novel. In this dissertation, I evaluate and describe the critical interrogative work that Charlotte Lennox, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen and Sarah Green perform using their novels as exemplars to consider ideas about women, education and particularly the potentially positive effects of novel reading. In the next section, I discuss the works of important historic contributors who have helped develop ideas about reading's formative potential. In subsequent sections, I examine how these ideas informed critical inquiry in *The Female Quixote* (1752), *Belinda* (1801), *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and *Scotch Novel Reading* (1824).

A Historical Debate

My purpose in this review is not to describe all of the contributions of historical philosophers who have theorized reading's effect. Rather, I narrowly trace the growth of one idea about reading fiction—the idea that it contributes to developing critical reasoning skills that result in personal formation. The earliest arguments do not address the novel—a genre that was not yet imagined. However, they agree about aspects of

(10). He argues that only some texts support his theory, or more importantly that some texts more effectively offer the opportunity for personal formation.

fiction's effect as an imaginary experience. First, the imaginative interaction with literature influences the receiver. Second, adolescents are more susceptible to these effects. Finally, the philosophers and authors I examine each propose actions to either prevent the dangerous potential of literature's effects on impressionable adolescents or methods that will develop sophistication and critical thinking skills. I begin with Plato's fears about imaginative interaction with literature—poems and drama in his day. I point to the inconsistencies between his arguments against literature and his own extensive use of fiction to teach. Much subsequent argument about the danger of fiction recapitulate or refute Plato's conceptions and proscriptions. Plato describes the dilemma but he does not offer reasonable solutions.

Other subsequent philosophers and critics propose solutions. The others I describe in this section acknowledge potentially positive and negative effects of reading fiction, but they also suggest that the tension between competing possibilities contributes to reader formation. Horace, Quintilian and Milton argue that the competing ideas present in literature, if properly synthesized, result in better readers whose emotions and minds are exercised by fiction's effect, not captured by it—this synthesis leads to better reasoning.

Plato [427-347 B.C.E.]

"Plato is the greatest writer ever to theorize about the arts, yet—to over-simplify again—everyone thinks he was wrong." Thus begins Christopher Janaway's introduction to Plato's contribution to literary theory in *Images of Excellence*. I concur with Janaway's seemingly contradictory assessment of Plato's writings and influence. Most of the critical literature that contradicts Plato's judgments dissects the few direct statements about *poiesis* and *mimesis* in books II, III and X of *The Republic*. Mark Edmundson suggests,

"The most poetic of philosophers may be repudiating his own poetic prowess at the end of his major volume, and thus teaching us how to read it, retrospectively: as something reasonable" (6-7). Edmundson argues that Plato wants his students to read his discourses, but he also wants them to evaluate them and challenge what is inconsistent. Landy, too, argues that the errors in Plato's arguments are intended to teach critical reasoning. He contends, "Plato's dialogues would not function as training-grounds for reasoning were it not for the deliberate holes punched into the arguments" (12). Landy claims that "The end goal for Plato is not the mere acquisition of superior understanding but instead a well-lived *life*…what one crucially needs is a *method*, a procedure for ridding oneself of those opinions that are false" (11). Plato's contradictory attitude about poetry should be evaluated by the reader, not assimilated without critique. There are internal clues in Plato's writings that suggest his invectives against some poetry are not universal judgments against *all* poetry. For instance he argues, "I do not mind saying to you, that all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them" (Book X, 378). Though he says *all*, he does not mean *all*. When he proposes to ban *all* poets from the Republic, he means all poets who do not write the kind of stories that lead people to be good citizens.

Plato himself relates stories to stimulate inquiry; he narrates the kind of stories he wants good poets to write. At the beginning of Book II, Plato relates a fictional story about a shepherd named Gyges. In this fabulous tale, Gyges enters a rift in the ground caused by an earthquake. Inside he finds a golden ring that has power to make him invisible. Plato wants his interlocutors to contemplate the power associated with being invisible. What effect would that kind of unregulated power have? In the story, Gyges

enters the court of the ruler, seduces his wife and kills the king. Based on this imaginary tale, Plato argues that people would be corrupted by a ring that makes them invisible—which ensures no accountability.

This is one of several tales that Plato employs to derive exemplary lessons and contemplate the importance of character development. Additionally, in Book X, the one in which he makes his strongest arguments against poets, Plato concludes with another parabolic fiction. A warrior named Er is killed in battle. After twelve days, his body has not yet decayed; on the twelfth day, he returns to life and descends into the underworld, where he observes the rewards given to the virtuous and the ill treatment of the wicked.[6] Why does Plato employ this story that is clearly a fable? He wants students to think about virtue and its reward; if fables help readers, he pragmatically employs them. Plato argues:

> Let each one of us leave every other kind of knowledge and seek and follow one thing only, if peradventure he may be able to learn and may find someone who will make him able to learn and discern between good and evil, and so to choose always and everywhere the better life as he has opportunity. He should consider the bearing of all these things which have been mentioned severally and collectively upon virtue. (412)

Plato considers his own use of fables meritorious, since he uses them to teach critical reflection. I argue that Plato's underlying argument is largely correct—reading fictional literature can exert a strong formative influence. However, I disagree that young readers—the future guardians—need to be protected from reading fiction. Plato sees only the negative potential, when young readers encounter poetry. This is because he feels poetry is false—it is not able to communicate the ideal. Therefore, he favors censorship. The only literature that he would allow in his theoretical Republic would be beneficial

[6] This is a thematic trope that will be repeated by many other authors including especially Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Written 1308-1320).

instances.[7] Plato describes the dilemma that continues to challenge subsequent literary critics—how do we manage the results of reading fiction? Richardson and Johnson will prescribe similar prophylaxes against certain kinds of reading in their era. I contend that Plato's prescription is counter-intuitive. It is hard to imagine how young readers who are allowed to read only unambiguous texts will be able to develop sophisticated judgment eventually. The absence of complicated reading is more likely to develop a world-view that imagines life's exigencies as easily comprehended. When will the guardians develop the ability to sort true and false occurrences, not just in literature but also in human behavior? Plato acknowledges life's complexity but favors methods of control instead of an architecture for growth in critical decision making.[8] He does not describe how the guarded-ones will progress to become guardians. While subsequent scholars debate components of Plato's philosophical framework, his ideas about the danger of imaginative interaction with fictional literature emerge relatively intact in in subsequent critical analyses. The themes that continue into other critical work include:

- Reading literature (or watching performed art) has the power to influence the behavior of readers/viewers through their unregulated emotions
- Because fictional/artistic representations are not accurate portrayals of what is true, unsophisticated readers who have no compensating life experience may assimilate values, beliefs and consequences that are false—and dangerous to them
- Carefully selected texts could be used to inculcate true values, if the *mimesis* is carefully crafted (as Plato demonstrates by his own use of fables) and only positive poems/stories/drama are given to adolescents.

[7] Plato argues, "These tales must not be admitted into our state, whether they are supposed to have an allegorical meaning or not. For a young person cannot judge what is allegorical and what is literal; anything that he receives into his mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable and therefore it is most important that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thoughts" (Plato 75).

[8] So here also is there not strife and inconsistency in this life? Though I need hardly raise the question again, for I remember that all this has been already admitted; and the soul has been acknowledged by us to be full of these and 10,000 similar oppositions occurring at the same moment? (391)

Horace [65-8 B.C.E.] and Quintilian [35-99 C.E.]

Horace is an early Roman poet and critic who discusses ways poets should write to be considered *good* poets. His enduring and often repeated claim is that "The poets ultimate aim is *dulce et utile*, to be 'sweet and useful'" (Bressler 26). Bressler explains that, "The best writings…both teach and delight. To achieve this goal, poets must understand their audience: Whereas learned readers may want to be instructed, others may simply read to be amused. The poet's task is to combine usefulness and delight in the same literary" (26). The idea that fiction can accomplish two important tasks at the same time is an often repeated argument among eighteenth-century critics, especially as they attempt to justify the benefit of the novel.

Quintilian is a Roman professional teacher who writes expansively about his own experience in developing sophisticated students. He proposes solutions to Plato's educational dilemma and expands on Horace's one-line maxim. Quintilian's ideas emerge from his twenty years of experience tutoring Roman schoolboys. James Murphy in his introduction to the *Institutes of Oratory* points to the significant influence that Quintilian's writings had on British critics and authors including Sir Thomas Elyot, Ben Johnson, John Milton, Alexander Pope and Benjamin Disraeli. In America, John Quincy Adams quoted from Quintilian's *Institutes* in a series of lectures given in the early nineteenth century (Murphy xxv-xxvi).

Like Plato, Quintilian's interest is not literary criticism. He is interested in how to employ reading various texts, including literary ones, to develop *orators*, most of whom will become lawyers, scholars and politicians in Rome. Quintilian is interested in what students read and how they interact with ideas that emerge from their private and public

reading. One of Quintilian's solutions for preventing detrimental reading is to have students' reading subjected to peer and teacher analysis, thus preventing uncontrolled, self-regulated reading that Plato fears (Bizzell 361). In Book X, which discusses reading practices, Quintilian explains:

> One of the most useful exercises, is to learn the history of these causes of which we have taken the pleadings in hand for perusal, and, whenever opportunity shall offer, to read speeches delivered on *both sides* of the same question. It will also be of advantage to know how different orators pleaded the same causes. (*Institutes*, X, 1, 22)

Since Quintilian's goal for young students is development of their reasoning and their ability to make and refute arguments, he recommends reading *both sides* of a question. He wants future orators to not be persuaded to think in one way, only because they have not heard both sides. He also cautions readers against favoring great writers with immediate acceptance, just because they are famous.[9]

Another of Quintilian's contributions is his emphasis on detailed, analytical reading. He argues that close reading of narratives develops discernment that will equip students with skills to be used in other contexts. Even poetry and fables are to be analyzed, looking for parts that are likely true and parts that must be read as fable. To the skill of critical narrative analysis Quintilian adds the need for character analysis:

> The pupil will then proceed by degrees to higher efforts, to praise illustrious characters and censure the immortal; an exercise of manifold advantage; for the mind is thus employed about a multiplicity and variety of matters; the understanding is formed by the contemplation of good and evil…Next succeeds exercise in comparison, which of two characters is the better or the worse, which, though it is managed in a similar way, yet

[9] Nor must he who reads feel immediately convinced that everything that great authors has said is necessarily perfect; for they sometimes make a false step, or sink under their burden, or give way to the inclinations of their genius; nor do they always equally apply their minds, but sometimes grow weary (X. 1. 24).

> both doubles the topics, and treats not only of the nature, but the degrees of virtues and vices. (II. IV. 20, 21)

Quintilian encourages young reader to assess the nature of individual behavior for virtue, consistency and signs of latent flaws. His contribution to the inquiry about reading is that he advances solutions rather than proscriptions; while he acknowledges minimal ability in adolescent critical reading, he articulates methods to improve that area. He argues that teaching and practicing critical reading skills under the tutelage of a mentor fits them for the various occupations that will require sophisticated adult judgment. Finally, in Book II, Quintilian devotes a chapter to critical reading. This excerpt describes the detailed observations he proposes:

> For to me it seems easier, as well as far more advantageous, that the master…should appoint one pupil to read, (and it will be best that this duty should be imposed on them by turns) that they may thus accustom themselves to clear pronunciation; and then, after explaining the cause for which the oration was composed, (for so that which is said will be better understood) that he should leave nothing unnoticed which is important to be remarked, either in the thought or the language; that he should observe what method is adopted…what clearness, brevity, and apparent sincerity, is displayed in the statement of facts; what design there is an certain passages…in regard to the style too, he should notice any expression that is peculiarly appropriate, elegant, or sublime when the amplification deserves praise; what quality is opposed to it, what phrases are happily metaphorical, what figures of speech are used, what part of the composition is smooth and polished, yet manly and vigorous. (*Institutes*, II. V. 6-9)

While Quintilian is referring primarily to previously recorded histories and orations, the practices he teaches are adapted to the reading of poetry or novels. Like Landy, Quintilian proposes that the expectation from reading is not primarily acquisition of information; rather it is the development of reasoning and judgment.

Milton [1608-1674]

John Milton further develops these ideas suggesting that protection of readers from false information should result from their own critical reading—not ecclesiastical or government censorship. John Milton's most direct analysis of the effect of critical reading is presented in his *Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing*. In 1643, Parliament passed a law requiring books to be licensed (approved) before publication. The law was aimed at suppressing selected religious tracts and books in order to unify the system of beliefs within England. Milton writes a speech that was intended to be read—today we would call it an Op Ed. In his declaration, Milton opposes the licensing law on several counts; his central argument, though, is based on man's ability to sort ambiguity for himself—therefore, the law is unnecessary. He contends that good readers can decide what is true and false. Milton states, "I have first to finish as was propounded, what is to be thought in general of reading books, whatever sort they be, and whether be more the benefit or the harm that thence proceeds?" (Milton 209). These Miltonian arguments will be adapted in the following century to argue whether novels largely corrupt or construct readers. An interesting initial argument he makes is that "Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are. Books preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them" (202). Here Milton suggests there is a kind of living power in books that influences readers. Consequently, he argues that censoring a book is equivalent to snuffing the life of its author—both are living communicators. Rather than warning against the detrimental power of books, Milton points to their value in preparing people for life by developing discernment. He cites as

an example the experience of Dionysius Alexandrinus, "A person of great name in the Church for piety and learning." Dionysius wondered if he could read secular literature in order to understand and refute it. He received a vision that instructed him, "Read any books what ever come to thy hands, for thou are sufficient both to judge aright, and to examine each matter" (210). This is an important precedent for Milton; he believes that good judgment is a universal gift and that people have sufficient ability to make good decisions about what they read. Milton adds, "God uses not to captivate under a perpetual childhood of prescription, but trusts him with the gift of reason to be his own chooser" (211). Using this logic, he suggests that sorting ambiguous reading is developmental:

> Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned…He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, he is the true warfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary…that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. (212)

This is the kind of rational sorting work that Landy also is imagining. He and Milton argue that the practice of reading and sorting competing ideas develops skill in reasoning. This is a similar argument that Letitia Barbauld rephrases in 1810, when she suggests:

> Some knowledge of the world is also gained by these writings, imperfect indeed, but attained with more ease, and attended with less danger, than by mixing in real life...to either sex it must be desirable that the first impressions of fraud, selfishness, profligacy and perfidy should be connected, as in good novels they always will be, with infamy and ruin. At any rate, it is safer to meet with a bad character in the pages of a fictitious story, than in the polluted walks of life. (Nixon 367)

Landy, Milton and Barbauld argue that complex texts equip readers with critical reasoning skills. The absence of this kind of training leads to naivety not maturity. Milton argues that censorship only hides information presented in *books*; it has no effect on

obscuring the same information and activities observed in life (219). He suggests that "God sure[ly] esteems the growth and completing of one virtuous person, more than the restraint of ten vicious" (Ibid.). Milton expresses confidence in readers' power to sort truth and learn from complicated or competing versions of the same issue. He personifies truth as a female combatant and argues that she exerts corrective power over falsehood.

> And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and falsehood grapple; who ever knew truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter. Her confuting is the best and surest suppressing. (239)

While Milton's arguments are carefully framed and express confidence in truth's supremacy and readers' sagacity, many eighteenth-century critics disagree with his confidence in reader ability and truth's ability to always refute error.

An Eighteenth-Century Perspective

In *The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel*, Marina MacKay titles the first section *Passions Awakened: the Dangers of Fiction*. She explains, "If the novel mattered in those first decades when it really was 'novel,' it was because this wildly *popular* new genre seemed too *dangerous* to ignore" (2). Her analysis emphasizes the duality in the novel that critics feared. The novels were popular; they provided cheap entertainment to an increasingly literate population. However, their realism made them susceptible to imaginative imitation. MacKay explains:

> On this view, novels were distinctively dangerous because distinctively realistic: while no one would be foolish enough to model his or her behavior on the wildly implausible fictions of earlier times (so the argument goes), this new type of narrative fiction, with its complex characters, it's recognizable settings, and it's broadly credible sequence of events, might dupe the sequestered and susceptible into believing it a reliable guide to the world. (3)

MacKay cites Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance* (1785) as one of the early harbingers of the dangers of novel reading. Reeve compares and contrasts Romances with early British novels. At the conclusion of evening six,[10] she summarizes her assessment of Romances:

> Upon the whole, I think, we may conclude, that Romances in general are neither the sublime compositions which their enthusiastic admirers have represented them; or so contemptible and pernicious as some prejudiced men have described them.—If upon a fair and impartial review of them, it appears, that they inculcated the greater principles of virtue and honor; though (in the times of Gothic ignorance) they might be productive of many absurdities, and some real evils; yet they were by no means so dangerous, as many writings of later times, of which I shall have occasion to speak hereafter. (Reeve, 105-6)

The two pivotal arguments Reeve presents are that Romances generally "inculcated principles of virtue and honor," and that they were *not dangerous*…as later writings had become. Euphrasia's summary of the first six discourses about Romances begins to establish the framework she will employ in her attack on the negative effects of novels. During the next six evenings (discourses), Euphrasia explains to Hortensius, her host and interlocutor, the dangerous differences she has observed between Epics and Romances of the past and the Novels of the present (published prior to 1785 when *The Progress of Romance* was published). She points to ambiguity and moral indecipherability in novels:

> What goddess, or what Muse must I invoke to guide me through these vast unexplored regions of fancy? – Regions inhabited by wisdom and folly,– by wit and stupidity,– by religion and profaneness,– by morality and licentiousness.– How shall I *separate* and *distinguish* the various and

[10] The full title of this book is *The Progress of Romance and the History of Charoba, Queen of Aegypt*. The format is a series of Socratic discussions among three persons. Hortensius, the sceptic and primary receiver of the lectures, Sophronia, another auditor and sometimes interpreter who facilitates clearer communication and enforces the rules of rhetoric, and Euphrasia, the primary teacher in the discussions. The three interlocutors meet together by common consent to discuss their opinions about past and present literary production. These discourses take place over a period of twelve nights. The first six nights are devoted to the ontogeny of Romances. The second set of six nights are devoted to the contrasts between Romances and Novels, and especially to the dangers of novels and how to control and administer them to younger readers.

> *opposite qualities* of these strange concomitants?–point out some as the objects of admiration and respect, and others of abhorrence and contempt? (109)

Reeve identifies as of first importance the mixed nature of modern novels. She contends that the dual content, undistinguished by the authors, poses danger to young readers. Her essential question is, "How shall I separate and distinguish the opposite qualities?" for the reader. Unlike Milton, she assumes readers do not possess this capability. The idea that young readers are unable to distinguish ambiguity inhabits much of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary criticism. Like her historical predecessors, she agrees there is a power exercised over the reader by fiction, and she agrees that the young are the most susceptible to its influence. However, her solution is censorship. Reeve provides a list of *approved* texts at the end of her discourse. Her solution—don't expose the kids to complexity, irony or ambiguity—does not consider how to eventually develop their critical reading skills.

The Literary and Social Context

By the time *The Female Quixote* is published (1752), the development of the novel and the creation of a class of critics had advanced significantly. Since the publication of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) the number of authors and novels increased rapidly. Among the most well-known are Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749). Sarah Fielding publishes *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744) and Smollett publishes *Roderick Random* (1748). With the growing publishing industry develops a parallel community of literary critics. Some novels' authors also contributed critical analyses of theirs and others' work. Authors and critics framed conceptions about novels, their

purposes and the dangers and the desirability of reading them. A central interest about the novel was its utility—what could and should the novel do? Were there dangers in reading certain kinds of fiction? Were some subjects and situations more acceptable? If they were, who should control publication and how? Their analyses were often published in literary journals, but they were also included within novels as prefatory remarks that were intended to guide reception. Defoe's preface to *Moll Flanders* (1722) states:

> But as this Work is chiefly recommended to those who know how to Read it, and how to make good Uses of it, which the Story all along recommends to them; so it is to be hop'd that such Readers will be much more pleas'd with the Moral, then the Fable; with the Application, than with the Relation, and with the End of the Writer, than with the Life of the Person written of… Upon this Foundation this Book is recommended to the Reader, as a Work from every part of which something may be learned, and some just and religious Inference is drawn, by which the Reader will have something of Instruction, if he pleases to make use of it. (Defoe 2-4)

Defoe suggests that regardless of the content of the novel, every part can impart lessons. Defoe believes novels exercise influence over the reader, and he believes his readers will know how to read. His method to achieve these ends, however, is different in important ways. Moll is not presented as an exemplary figure; she is a mixture of criminal and victim. Defoe prods readers to develop their own sense of who Moll is and why.

Other eighteenth-century novelists are interested in helping their readers learn how novels work and the effects they hope reading will accomplish. In her preface to *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil and his Family* (1721), Penelope Aubin asserts that her work is to teach morality and *Vertue* by means of this new literary genre.[11] Her idea is not that books exercise an irresistible power over the reader; rather,

[11] Since serious things are, in a manner, altogether neglected, by what we call the Gay and Fashionable Part of Mankind, and Religious Treatises grow mouldy on the Booksellers Shelves in the Back-Shops; . . . the few that honor Virtue and wish well to our Nation, ought to study to reclaim our Giddy Youth; and since

she concludes that readers, having observed exemplary characters in the novel, will choose to follow good examples. Contrarily, seeing villains and seducers properly punished will inform readers who might in consequence avoid those paths of infamy. While she wants readers to do some work, she exercises a didactic style in her novels.

Those didactic novels that carefully characterize and sort the virtuous from the villain do not solve the problem of reader credulity. I argue that, when novels presort predictable characters, they do not represent accurately the ambiguity that is frequently encountered in real life. They do not prepare readers for complex persons and situations—the seducer, the swindler, the charlatan and the fraud. While there is positive work done for the reader in identifying types of people with whom they might interact, the awareness of one-dimensional characters does not develop sophisticated readers. In these novels, there is little work to be done by the reader, and there is little development.

Tobias Smollett's preface to *The Adventures of Roderick Random* explains that the reading of his novel will cause readers to improve, because of the example observed in his fictional hero. Smollett suggests a moral and ethical sympathy develops that connects the reader with fictional characters. That connection positions readers for behavioral modification. He explains how he hopes this will work:

> The reader gratifies his curiosity, in pursuing the adventures of a person in whose favour he is prepossessed; he espouses his cause, he sympathizes with him in distress, his indignation is heated against the authors of his calamity; the humane passions are inflamed; the contrast between dejected virtue, and insulting vice, appears with greater aggravation, and every impression having a double force on the imagination, the memory retains the circumstance, and the heart improves by the example. (Smollett xxxiii)

Reprehensions fail, try to win them to Vertue, by Methods where Delight and Instruction may go together. With this Design I present this Book to the Public, in which you will find a Story, where Divine Providence manifests itself in every Transaction, where Vertue is try'd with Misfortunes, and rewarded with Blessings: in fine, where Men behave themselves like Christians, and Women are really vertuous, as such as we ought to imitate (Aubin 75).

Smollett expresses confidence in a tale well told, but he additionally suggests the beneficial effect of the emotional connection between the reader and the novel. Defoe and Aubin rely on cognitive assimilation and imitation. Smollett suggests that the heart (emotional capacity) improves by the observed example. It is not just observing a good example that guides the reader of a novel, he argues; it is the identification with and emotional participation in the hero's adventures that shapes their response.

Another important critical work that considers reading's effect is Pierre-Daniel Huet's *The History of Romances* (1715). He argues what Romances (novels) should do:

> The Principal end of *Romance*, or at least what ought to be so, and is chiefly to be regarded by the Author, is the Instruction of the Reader; before whom he must present Virtue successful, and Vice in Disgrace; but because the Mind of Man naturally hates to be inform'd, and (by the influence of Self-Conceit) resists instruction; 'tis to be deceived by the Blandishments of Pleasure; and the Rigor of Precept is to be subdued by the Allurements of Example. Thus it appears, That the Entertainment of the Reader, which the Ingenious Romancer seems chiefly to design, is subordinate to his Principal Aim, which is the Instruction of the Mind and Correction of Manners; and the Beauty of a *Romance* stands or falls according to its Attention to this Definition and End. (Nixon 337-338)

In his assessment, Huet points to the means and the ends, which he thinks should be the basis for useful fictional literature—*entertainment* and *instruction*. While he argues that the instruction needs to discriminate between virtues and vices, he acknowledges the significant teaching work that entertainment accomplishes. Since the minds of men resist pedantic presentation, the teaching aspect needs to be enacted by entertainment. For Huet, these are not separate functions; rather, they are intertwined in a way that makes learning enjoyable. Interestingly, Huet claims that vice represented in Romances should not be suppressed, since it provides a prophylaxis for readers. He argues that observing evil accurately portrayed in fiction helps readers recognize it in their own world, so that

they can avoid it:

> If anyone object; that Love is treated of in a Manner so Soft and Insinuating, that the Bait of this Dangerous Passion invades too easily the Tender Hearts: I answer, that it is so far from being Dangerous, that it is in some Respects Necessary, that the Young People of the world should be acquainted with it; that they may stop their Ears to that which is Criminal, and be better fortified against its Artifices; and know their Conduct, in that which has an Honest and sacred End. (Nixon 342)

Huet echoes Milton's logic expressed in *Areopagitica*. He argues that people can only understand virtue when they comprehend it in its relationship to evil. He insists that reading accounts of fictional vice fortifies young people against its temptation; reading *about* evil before they experience it prepares them to make better choices. Equally significant in Huet's critical argument is his claim that Romance novels are better teachers of principles than "Tutors and Philosophers":

> Nothing so much refines and polishes Wit; nothing conduces so much to the Forming and advancing it to the Approbation of the World, as the Reading of Romances. These are the Dumb Tutors, which succeed those of College, and teach us how to Live and Speak by a more Persuasive and Instructive Method than their's; who deserve the Compl[i]ment of *Horace* upon the *Iliad*, "That it teaches Morality more effectually, than the Precepts of the most Able Philosophers." (Huet 342)

This is a strong claim that fiction inculcates truth more effectively than human teachers. Huet's is an important idea presented in many eighteenth-century novels—that the novel becomes a modern tutor. It entertains in clever ways; it also improves readers' sophistication by teaching them to negotiate the novel's realistic complexity.

The Novelists Engage the Argument

It is within this historical and contemporary critical framework that Charlotte Lennox, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen and Sarah Greene participate. Drawing on threads of theory as ancient as Plato's and Quintilian's and ideas about novels as recent

as Huet's and Johnson's, these authors employ their novels as a forum for reader analysis. In their novels, they weave reader development, critical analysis and social critique into narratives about complex characters. They examine in new ways the old questions of fiction's effect, reader response and authorial influence.

Charlotte Lennox [1727-1804]

In *The Female Quixote* (1752), Lennox employs her cast of variably-skilled and unskilled readers to critique reading practices and romances familiar to eighteenth-century British readers. Her topic, the foolish-female reader, and her interest in the effects of reading on "the young, the ignorant, and the idle" (Johnson 156) are important social and literary concerns. Her conceptions of the novel and its work are influenced by her association with Samuel Johnson and Samuel Richardson, but she also demonstrates an originality in her own ideas. Duncan Isles explains that Johnson introduced Lennox to Richardson: "[Richardson] helped her in at least three distinct ways: as a novelist, he gave her literary advice; as a printer, he printed the first edition of letters, and he used his influence in the literary world on her behalf" (419). Not surprisingly, Lennox's narrative points to similar dangers of reading that Johnson identifies in *Rambler No. 4*, which had been published two years earlier. She is also interested in the issues of amatory novels, as was Richardson. Thomas Keymer's introduction to *Pamela* discusses this theme:

> In the anonymous preface that Richardson wrote for Penelope Aubin's posthumous *Collection of Entertaining Histories and Novels* (1739) he praises Aubin as achieving an exemplary purifications of amatory fiction…Aubin is a salutary alternative for youthful readers, working instead to 'instill into their Minds the Principles of Virtue and Honour, and that at a Time when they are most susceptible of such Impressions as may be attended with either happy or pernicious Effects on their future Lives and Morals.' (*Pamela* xxi)

Keymer concludes that Richardson's preface, written in the same year that *Pamela* was being composed, "Anticipates Richardson's private accounts of his own attempts to appropriate and convert the risky immoralities of scandal fiction and seduction narrative" (Ibid). These same acts of "appropriation and conversion" of amatory fiction and the potential "seduction narrative" are also employed by Lennox. Arabella constantly fears being "carried away" by some pernicious male suitor with the resultant rape. Like Richardson, Lennox calculates that the presentation of this subject in her novel will have greater positive than negative impact. Duncan Isles concludes:

> In *The Female Quixote* Mrs. Lennox chose to subject an already-familiar topic to deeper and more comprehensive treatment, examining the general relationship between fiction and history, and emphasizing the positive value of good fiction as well as ridiculing the romances themselves. (420)

Though she associates with Johnson and Richardson, Lennox communicates theories about reading's effect on readers that move well beyond the conservative ideas of her mentors. The title and narrative may overtly warn against naïve reading; however, the greater work of her novel portrays the educational and formational effect of reading fiction. While portions of the text, especially the pronouncements of the Countess and learned doctor, function in traditional didactic ways, the narrative itself more subtly develops sophisticated reading—in those who can be encouraged to learn through observation, reason and synthesis of competing narratives. A central question that Lennox contemplates is, "Can readers learn how to make good decisions through observing fictional characters who are making bad decisions?"

Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849)

In Chapter 3, I analyze and critique Maria Edgeworth's novel *Belinda* (1801). Edgeworth claims that her narrative is a "Moral Tale"—not a novel.[12] At the time of publication, Edgeworth perceives there is little consensus about the effects of novel reading. To avoid the generic criticism against novels, she places her narrative in another genre—didactic literature. I concur with her classification—it *is* a moral tale and there *is* clear didactic rhetoric in the narrative, as she contrasts her heroine, Belinda Portman, with those women who compete for Belinda's affections and loyalty, including Lady Delacour, Lady Anne Percival and Mrs. Harriet Freke. Additionally, Edgeworth incorporates a *Sophia*-like woman into her sub-plot, who is about the same age as Belinda. This young woman, Virginia St. Pierre, has been completely deluded by her physical isolation and her immersion in reading romances. By comparing these female readers, Edgeworth contrasts the desirability and the dangers of novel reading. Kathryn Kirkpatrick summarizes Edgeworth's argument, "Like Clara Reeve, Edgeworth advocates discrimination in reading. She offers *Belinda* as a new kind of moral fiction, and her heroine as the antithesis of the woman of sensibility" (*Belinda* xiii).

I argue that *Belinda* interrogates and challenges conceptions of female quixotic reading depicted in previous literary and critical texts. Specifically, she challenges the idea that fictional narratives can successfully overwrite essential selves. Within the developing form of the novel, Edgeworth wants to *show* how rational judgement trumps performative external display, rather than *explain* the argument. She uses the novel's

[12] The following work is offered to the public as a Moral Tale—the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel…so much folly, errour, and vice are disseminated in books classed under this denomination (*Belinda* 4).

power of *showing* to depict the correction of exterior performance and the unsustainable literal identification with fictional characters. She contends that a performed persona cannot be sustained under the pressure of real-life experiences and objective examination. She demonstrates that the essential self may be hidden in a masquerade of performance, but that it is not erased or overwritten. The principle resolution in this novel is not the marriage of all the single heroines—though that does occur. Edgeworth presents arguments about proper maturation. Elizabeth Harden summarizes Edgeworth's work:

> Throughout her works, Miss Edgeworth sought to make wisdom and goodness attractive; she attempted to raise the humbler virtues to their proper importance by illustrating their effectiveness in everyday life, and she hoped to make the loftiest principles and intellectual attainments appealing and agreeable by uniting them with amiable manner and lively temperaments. (225)

Though she claims her text is not a novel, Edgeworth employs features of novels to communicate her didactic work—specifically, she creates and employs complex characters to portray ambiguity and she presents social concerns in multiple competing views. Additionally, she examines the role of reading in her characters. Like her other contemporary female authors that I discuss, she believes in readings' power to influence positively. She aims to employ the dynamic resident in novels to guide readers' minds.

Jane Austen [1775-1817]

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) in many ways parallels the plots of Lennox's and Edgeworth's novels—a young woman heroine enters society who is learning lessons from reading, augmented by experience. Beyond the evident similarities, Austen's novel introduces new perspectives about reading's effect on women *and men.* She more directly engages her own readers and invests much of her narrative in training

her readers, as she presents the training of Catherine Morland. In Chapter 4, I assess and describe the ways that Austen conceives of the novel's effect and its potential contribution to women's education. Austen focuses attention on the complexity and ambiguity of life and then points to solutions that emerge from sophisticated reading. At the beginning of the novel, Catherine is described as "stupid," though this is one of the many instances of the author's/narrator's use of irony. While she is not stupid, Catherine at seventeen is unequipped for life in society. Her greatest deficiency is her lack of reflection—about what she reads and about the inner nature of her friends. In a series of decision-making challenges, Catherine learns to reflect and progresses in sophistication.

One of Austen's significant alterations to the genre of the novel is that she places her heroines in mostly prosaic domestic environments. Yet, these ordinary ingredients are sufficient to accomplish her maturation. By placing her heroine in ordinary circumstances, Austen is redefining what it means to be a heroine. Catherine is not required to defeat elemental forces, receive an unexpected inheritance or marry a prince. Rather, she is required to develop her own subjective self and learn to increasingly rely on her own judgment about others' character and motivations.

Austen is interested in the conditions of reading and reader impact, as were her predecessors, but her conceptions of solutions to these historical questions are different than Johnson's and Lennox's. Austen suggests that reading fiction is an important, even essential, component of educating women. Austen argues like Joshua Landy that reading contributes to the formation of the person. For Austen, immersive reading is a tool of rationale development. She refutes previous conceptions of naïve women and the non-meritorious effects of reading, as well as prior simplistic, cause-and-effect assessments of

novel reading. She demonstrates the several possible outcomes from reading, and argues that a normal expectation for young readers who are centered in supportive and interacting communities is incremental education and self-development.

Sarah Green [1763-1825]

In Chapter 5, I analyze Sarah Green's *Scotch Novel Reading* [1824] that focuses attention on the limits of imagination and the self-correcting nature of experience over fiction. This narrative employs a similar construction as those employed in other novels I discuss—a young female reader entering society who is ill prepared. A new argument in Green's novel is the self-correcting feature that thwarts extended quixotism in young readers. Green suggests that when the reality of a subject is compared to the fictive imagination of that same subject, the imaginary image is diminished and eventually erased. What is of significance in this representation is that Plato's premise about art corrupting truth is strongly contested. Green suggests that fictional notions developed by reading novels cannot be sustained, when the reader is faced with the real character or object. For Green, the true object cannot be superimposed permanently by artistic representation. In terms of reading's effect, romantic fictions may stimulate ideas that lead to limited identification and appropriation. In *Scotch Novel Reading*, this fictional representation, however, is erased, not by the power of argumentation as represented in *The Female Quixote*, nor by the power of reader development as represented by *Northanger Abbey*; rather, a natural process of comparing what is imagined with its real counterpart eventually replaces idealistic notion. This argument also challenges Johnson's idea that adolescent readers will be swept away by imaginative texts. Green suggests that pernicious reader identification is only a temporary effect.

In *Scotch Novel Reading*, Alice Fennel becomes enamored with all things Scottish through here reading of Sir Walter Scott's novels about the highlands. She begins to wear tartan cloth and attempts to imitate a Scottish brogue. Ultimately she vows to marry a Scottish hero like Rob Roy. Restoration to her own language, wardrobe and reality is effected by encounters with *real* Scottish people. In the progress of disaffection, she realizes that what she values is not overwrought fictive representations but real people who are encountered in normal social discourse. Alice's experiences, mistakes and disappointed imagination work to develop her as a sophisticated person and a more critical reader.

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CHAPTER 2

THE FEMALE QUIXOTE – ISOLATED READING'S EFFECTS

A Dispute very learnedly handled by two Ladies, in which the Reader may take what Part he pleases. (Title of Book V, Ch. 1)

Which includes by a very good Example, that a Person ought not to be too hasty in deciding a Question he does not perfectly understand. (Title of Book V, Ch. 2)

Introduction

At the physical center of Charlotte Lennox's second novel, *The Female Quixote* (1752), these two chapter titles announce the principle authorial device and the work required of sophisticated readers. In the novel Arabella is the primary lady who inserts herself in disputes over the meaning of observed human behavior and implied intentions; Miss Charlotte Glanville, Arabella's cousin, is the other lady who consistently opposes Arabella's judgments and opinions. Arabella's declarations are derived from her reading of romance novels. Her self-directed enactment of novels is quixotic. Miss Glanville argues against Arabella's romantic based on her observations and knowledge of social expectations. "The Reader may take what Part he pleases." Lennox's instructs readers that they will be challenged with competing arguments and will need to synthesize a unified meaning. But Lennox warns, don't be "too hasty" in judging.

Carroll Johnson explains that when reading Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, "Our enjoyment depends on the disparity between the reading strategies of [Quixote and Sancho]" (92). Lennox's closely follows Cervantes' narrative strategy and delivers

readers' enjoyment by the Arabella and Miss Glanville opposition.[13] The challenge for Lennox's readers is determining which perspective they wish to believe. In spite of her apparent madness, Arabella is interesting, educated, rich and beautiful. Though Charlotte Glanville is also rich and beautiful, she is not a reader, is self-centered and pragmatic. As readers, it is more enjoyable to side with Arabella. What readers want from the story affects how they read and how they wish the narrative to work.[14] Yet, like Mr. Glanville, we want Arabella to moderate her readings of people—to see them as they are not as they are imagined to be. The essential conflict of the novel is how to read Arabella.

As the chapter epigraph suggests, readers need to be sophisticated in their judgments. I argue that Lennox's novel works to develop critical reading skills in three ways—one is obvious and the two other more subtle. First, she portrays an evident example—or *anti*-example—of a reader whose isolated and self-directed reading generates mistakes in her understanding and application. Next, the author delivers conflicting versions of the same event, person or conversation. These discrepant versions make readers work to synthesize contradictory accounts. Finally, the author initiates and sustains a metatextual conversation with readers employing chapter titles that present guidance and additional information. The chapter-title conversations seem rational and they often make available a third competing perspective for reader adjudication.

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[13] Scott Black comments, "Each [Arabella and Miss Glanville] is absorbed by a narrow band of experience, and the comedy of their interactions depends on the perspectival clash of literalisms as a tiresome world of fashion and a fantastic world of passion talk past each other."

[14] In Cervantes' original tale, Don Quixote queries Sampson Carrasco, "No, sure, replied the knight; but tell me Mr. batchelor, which of my exploits is most esteemed in this history?" Carrasco affirms the fact that what readers bring to the text affects their decisions. "As to that particular, said the batchelor, there are as many different opinions as there are different tastes…Nevertheless, resumed the batchelor, some who have read your history, say, they should not have been sorry, had the authors forgot a few of those infinite drubbings which, in different encounters, were bestowed on the great Don Quixote" (587). Cervantes points to the fact that readers' perspectives affect choices as they read.

Additionally, the chapter-title conversations interrupt and remind readers that they are reading a book written by an author who does not want them to read passively or simplistically—like her heroine. Lennox establishes a familiar discourse with her readers in which she encourages them to think about how novels work and how readers read.

By these three methods, Lennox encourages reader participation in sorting conflicting narratives. Meaning is created by readers and that will depend on their own preconceptions and biases. Lennox often spurs readers to pay attention; she suggests, "If I do not point this out, you may miss what is happening." Dorothee Birke's essay about chapter titles explains that many eighteenth-century writers used their novels not only to tell a story but also to discuss the way novels work. Readers immersed in a narrative are repeatedly interrupted with metatextual commentary and asked to participate in thinking with the author. Birke argues, "Charlotte Lennox's titles [are the ones] that [are] most obviously concerned with reading as a problem—after all, the misadventures of a reader are at the heart of its plot" (Birke 224).

Lennox also adjusts reader's focus by moving the venue for Arabella's adventures from the country to the fashionable city of Bath and eventually to London. Each of these venues provide a different backdrop and social setting that highlight Arabella's steady development in new ways. She grows intellectually and socially in the progress of the novel. Though she is generally misunderstood in the country, her literary education provides her with a basis for increasingly rational judgements. This is particularly evidenced in the part of the novel that takes place in Bath. There visitors are interested in fashion, appearance and performance. Arabella's social and moral commentary there seems particularly accurate.

In London, Arabella demonstrates increased feeling for sympathetic characters, though her judgment about the officer's mistress and the actress in the park is misplaced. She eventually exchanges her self-determined, unmediated and fiction-based behaviors for those that are more consistent with perceptions and judgments of contemporaries. She receives a social education through her reading that is eventually balanced by experience. Amy Hodges remarks, "In response to the framework of a rather unromantic modern England, Lennox negotiates the conflicting positions of women's subjectivity in public space as a means of promoting social literacy, the ability to "read" society in terms of power relationships and social hierarchies" (Hodges 1).[15]

Some modern critics suggest that the ending of *The Female Quixote* is a bad one for Arabella.[16] There are also critics who suggest that, unlike Don Quixote, Arabella regains her sanity and lives; she is rewarded with a marriage in which she and Mr. Glanville are "United in every Virtue and laudable Affection of the Mind" (383).[17] This

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[15] In her article, "*The Female Quixote* as Promoter of Social Literacy," she extends her argument to show the importance of a quixotic reader. "The Quixote thus becomes a literacy educator: her job is to test the boundaries of respectable subjectivity, and her facetious readings of her world train her reader to judge how a subject *could* operate in her situation, if that subject possessed the ability to accurately read her society" (7).

[16] Wendy Motooka lists several modern critics who feel that Arabella's position at the end of the novel is diminished by her alteration from being a quixote to being a married woman. In Motooka's article "Coming to a Bad End: Sentimentalism, Hermeneutics, and *The Female Quixote*," she cites these "bad end" theorists – Leland E. Warren, Margaret Anne Doody and Patricia Meyer Spacks. Motooka's own assessment is that "*The Female Quixote* comes to a bad end not because Arabella is defeated—in a sense, her way of thinking, as opposed to the Countess's or Miss Glanville's, does prevail—but because in opposing quixotism with sentimentalism, the novel fails to resolve the energetic tension that it so hilariously and successfully sets up between skeptical and credulous reading practices" (270).

[17] Sharon Palo's article "The Good Effects of a Whimsical Study: Romance and Women's Learning in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*" particularly defends the ending of the novel. Palo concludes, "Understandably the novel's conclusion troubles many recent critics, who often read Arabella's cure and subsequent marriage as an unfortunate but inevitable submission to patriarchal authority. If we read the novel within the context of the educational discourse that characterized the period, we can more clearly see that the inevitability of this conclusion gives the novel its power. With this ending, Lennox's text moves beyond a complex exploration of the possibilities created by women's learning and becomes a forceful critique of the limitations imposed upon educated women within a culture that restricts their ability to fully exercise their intellectual and creative powers" (228).

of course looks like the happy ending expected in a romance. I suggest that focus on *The Female Quixote's* ending misses the larger project of the novel—the progression of Arabella's and readers' skills that develop through sophisticated reading that is stimulated by reading novels.

Lennox's novel is an important milestone in the conversation about reader participation with the novel and the novel's influence on readers. Lennox minimizes the danger of novel reading that other contemporary authors and critics fear. She argues that a large part of a novel's work is to improve critical skills in reading. By *reading*, Lennox means not the ability to read words (literacy) but the ability to make sense of what is read in book and in people by reasoning, comparison and resolution of ambiguities. Lennox aims at improving her readers; her work is not primarily didactic—it is formative.

In this chapter, I discuss the literary and socially constructed expectations for women that Lennox addresses in the novel and point to contemporary critical commentary to which she is responding. As a mid-eighteenth century woman novelist, she is participating in a developing discourse about the novel's work and effects. Lennox examines and critiques particularly the idea of unsophisticated readers (usually implying *women* in the eighteenth century) and the effects of adoption of fiction as truth. That argument supposes a naïve reader endangers *her* ability to accurately comprehend and negotiate life's ambiguities and contingencies and suggests that the romance may be appropriated by readers as a standard for practice. Sharon Palo argues, "Nothing indicates that Lennox seriously believes that a woman can actually lose the ability to distinguish between fiction and reality as a result of reading too many romances. Arabella is, after all, a satirical rather than a realistic figure" (35). This is an important argument. Lennox's

portrayal of Arabella as a modern quixote does not affirm the causal relationship between novel reading and imitative behavior. Instead, Lennox demonstrates her heroine's intellectual development through these fictional readings. Arabella is contrasted with characters in the novel who don't read. The crises that Lennox points to are the tensions provoked between readers and nonreaders. I argue that Lennox portrays Arabella as a model for female intellectual development in much the same way that Austen will present her heroine, Catherine Morland. Sharon Palo adds, "[Lennox] appropriates the representation of romance reading generated by educational writers such as…Richardson and Fielding…in order to build her rather complex response to the state of women's education at the midpoint of the eighteenth century" (35). Lennox does critique in this novel the impact of socially developed constructions that limit opportunities for women to advance educationally or professionally. However, her larger project is imagining a different future for women which leverages the power of sophisticated reading to stimulate subjective development. Lennox depicts Arabella initially as a young, inexperienced and largely self-guided woman. This baseline depiction allows her to show progression. By mid-novel, other characters see advantages Arabella has gained through her experiences and reading. Lennox's readers, too, must continually update and revise their impressions of Arabella. She seems a little less foolish with each new experience.

Response to Contemporary Ideas

Lennox's employs her cast of variably-skilled and unskilled readers to assess and critique reading practices and literature that are familiar to eighteenth-century British readers. She engages the important critical conversation about reading's effect. She examines ideas from other critics and authors, including Mary Astell, Samuel

Richardson, Henry Fielding and Samuel Johnson. Her examination of the foolish-female-reader and her interest in the effects of reading on "the young, the ignorant, and the idle" (Johnson 156) are important social and literary concerns about which she is responding. Duncan Isles explains that Johnson introduced Lennox to Richardson. "[Richardson helped her in at least three distinct ways: as a novelist, he gave her literary advice; as a printer, he printed the first edition of her letters, and he used his influence in the literary world on her behalf" (419). Lennox's novel is an early novelistic argument for the positive value of novel reading. While her novel title suggest a parody about naïve reading, the work of the novel communicates the educational and formational value of reading.

Lennox builds her variation on this theme from declarations of her predecessors and contemporaries. For instance, in her preface to *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil and his Family* (1721), Penelope Aubin asserts that her aim is to teach morality and *Vertue* by means of this new literary genre, the novel.[18] Aubin writes novels that portray good behavior rewarded and bad behavior punished. Her novels model character and virtuous behavior that she hopes her readers will emulate. Her idea is not that books exercise an irresistible power over the reader; rather, she concludes that readers who observe exemplary characters in the novel will choose to follow good examples. Lennox agrees with the suggestion that novels that entertain might also be employed to teach; but

[18] Since serious things are, in a manner, altogether neglected, by what we call the Gay and Fashionable Part of Mankind, and Religious Treatises grow mouldy on the Booksellers Shelves in the Back-Shops [we should] try to win them to Vertue, by Methods where Delight and Instruction may go together. With this Design I present this Book to the Public, in which you will find a Story, where Divine Providence manifests itself in every Transaction, where Vertue is try'd with Misfortunes, and rewarded with Blessings: in fine, where Men behave themselves like Christians, and Women are really vertuous, as such as we ought to imitate (Aubin 75).

Lennox experiments with strategies other than exemplary behavior. She develops characters who are *not* precisely sketched as being good or bad and points to their inner subjective development as being the nexus of reader interest.

Another important earlier work that discusses the purposes and the potential of the novel is *The History of Romances* (1715) by Pierre-Daniel Huet. He argues that the purpose of prose fiction is instruction. Huet claims that Romance novels are better teachers of principles than "Tutors and Philosophers:"

> Nothing so much refines and polishes Wit; nothing conduces so much to the Forming and advancing it to the Approbation of the World, as the Reading of Romances. These are the Dumb Tutors, which succeed those of College, and teach us how to Live and Speak by a more Persuasive and Instructive Method than their's; who deserve the Compl[i]ment of *Horace* upon the *Iliad*, "That it teaches Morality more effectually, than the Precepts of the most Able Philosophers. (Huet 342)

Lennox responds to Huet's and Horace's arguments and creates a *novel*—a parody of a romance that both entertains and teaches.

Modern Assessments of *The Female Quixote*

In her book, *Regulating Readers*, Ellen Gardiner explores literary criticism produced by eighteenth-century authors and critics. Of particular interest to Gardner is the criticism incorporated *in* the novel. Her analysis "traces the rise of the novel-as-criticism" (Gardiner 11). Citing Linda Zionkowski, Gardiner argues that "Mid-eighteenth-century novelists were also engaged in a debate that centered on the formation of a literary canon" and that "participated in the shaping social, political and aesthetic beliefs" (11). Gardiner explains that she "takes Zionkowski's argument one step further when [she] recognizes these novelistic practices as inherently equivalent to the work of the new professional critic" (11). Gardiner explains that novels in the early and mid-

eighteenth century include arguments within the text that discuss the role of novels, readers and critics. In her chapter "Writing Men Reading in *The Female Quixote*," Gardiner points to the parallel tactics that Lennox employs to discuss both reading and criticism, and to evaluate good and bad results in these practices. Gardiner points to Lennox's critique of readers and writers within the novel and to Lennox's conclusion that there are few good readers, male or female.

Sir George Bellmour, for example, narrates his own unreliable narrative, composed primarily of half-truths and exaggerations. Mr. Glanville, Sir George's competitor for Arabella's love, knows the story is embellished but does not realize its purpose—stealing Arabella and acquiring her wealth. Most of Lennox's characters, except for the Countess and the Learned Doctor, are equally poor writers, readers and, therefore, poor critics. This characterizations suggests that authors, more than professional critics, are best equipped to critique novels. Gardiner adds that Lennox's claim about *women* being capable critics is one often repeated one among female eighteenth-century writers. The one person who maintains the greatest objectivity and sharpest critique throughout *The Female Quixote* is the author (narrator). Gardiner contends that Lennox is pointing to herself, the woman author, as the best critic. While readers are entertained by Arabella's misreading, they are concurrently engaged by the author who is teaching them how to critically read romances and novels.[19] While much critical analysis of this novel explores political and gender issues, Marta Kvande's explores acts of reading in Lennox's *The Female Quixote* and in Tabitha Gilman

[19] This is a practice that other important female writers will employ in their novels, including Maria Edgeworth, Fanny Burney and Jane Austen.

Tenney's *Female Quixotism.*[20] Kvande explains, "[both novels] clearly arose from the same basic impulse: to satirize the excesses associated with both novels and women." She concludes, "The two novels also offer clues to the ideas of the reader and the understanding of the nature of the reading act in the eighteenth-century context" (219).

While Lennox's quixote rehearses some of Cervantes' interests, she also discusses new concerns. Lennox describes the extreme isolation and limited content of Arabella's reading, which parallels Don Quixote's.[21] She also points to the intellectual and reasoning power that Arabella develops from her reading that allows her to influence others, which also parallels Cervantes' hero. However, Arabella is never subjected to physical abuse or public ridicule as is her predecessor. Arabella is able to communicate with others in a way that, though she often produces misunderstanding, she is never completely alienated. At times, her understanding excels that of others and she is recognized for her unexpected knowledge of subjects and her rhetorical skills. After she expounds on the subject of raillery, Sir Charles pays her a high compliment. "I protest, Lady Bella, said Sir Charles, who had listen'd to her with many Signs of Admiration, you speak like an Orator" (269). Though Sir Charles is frequently aggravated by Arabella, he is equally amazed at her intelligence. Her madness, like Quixote's, is limited to her romantic notions formed by reading romances. In all other areas, she appears articulate and witty. Kvande excuses much of Arabella's misreading, because Arabella has not been able to accumulate a broad

[20] This novel was published in America in 1752.

[21] The narrator states, "[The] young Lady, who was wholly secluded from the World; who had no other Diversion, but ranging like a Nymph through Gardens, or, to say better, the Woods and Lawns in which she was inclosed; and who had no other Conversation but that of a grave and melancholy Father, or her own Attendants… The perfect Retirement she lived in, afforded indeed no Opportunities of making Conquests she desired" (7). This physical, social and intellectual approximates imprisonment. If she is a bad reader, especially of people, it is due in great part to her limited social interactions and conversations. Her early years in isolation will be copied by Edgeworth in describing Virginia St. Pierre's youthful isolation in her novel *Belinda*, which I analyze in more detail in Chapter 4.

set of experiences that might have enabled her to discriminate between real and imaginary activity. She explains:

> In order to distinguish, a reader would have needed a stock of true images to compare to new impressions. Readers therefore needed competency in knowledge of the world in order not to be fooled. And increasingly over the eighteenth century, prescriptive discourse about gender roles came to insist that while men should be active in and familiar with the world, women *should not*. (222)

Kvande also argues that Lennox employs her protagonist to expose some of the ideas about eighteenth-century women's intellectual limitations. For Kvande, Arabella's story points to growth in reading sophistication that eventually rehabilitates her and allows her to participate more completely with society. Arabella's story is a specific species of *Bildungsroman*, one in which the *formation* is specifically in reading and discernment, not just in knowledge or experience. Kvande asserts, "For the ending to work, readers—like those within the novel who actively work to reintegrate her into her society—must be willing to accept that mad women and outsiders can be brought back within the fold" (229). This is one of the primary differences between Don Quixote and Arabella. The one dies without the possibility of restoration. Arabella only *nearly* dies; instead, her reason is reshaped by experience and conversation. Consequently, she is integrated into society by becoming a more sophisticated reader. It is significant that the last word of the novel is *mind* (383). Arabella and Mr. Glanville combine their estates and connect their families by marriage. But Lennox supersedes these external trappings of marriage emphasizing that Arabella's connections were more thorough because hers was a pairing of minds. Kvande is another critic who believes that Lennox's dénouement points to Arabella's advancement, not her reduction.

Organization and Issues

The novel describes Arabella's education in three phases—Set-up, Misadventures and Resolution. The Set-up is performed in Chapter 1. It explains how Arabella acquires her interest in romances and why she understands so little about contemporary protocols of courtship—she has no mother, no siblings, no peer friendships and no access to young men. The penultimate chapter (Book 9, Chapter 11) relates the arguments that facilitate the Resolution. The narrator explains how Arabella's views are altered by a critical dialog about the use of texts. It is in these early and late chapters that Lennox most thoroughly discusses readership. In them, she reminds her own readers of the dangers of naïve and uncritical reading. The remainder of the nearly 400-pages relate the adventures Arabella precipitates by her expectations of a romantically complicated courtship. In this section, Lennox develops her arguments about reading not as much through discourse as through examples of good and bad readers. She uses the story both to entertain and instruct the reader as Horace and subsequent critics propose.

The adventures that compose the narrative relate ways that Arabella misreads behavior, conversations, and intentions. Arabella declares what she believes she is seeing—threats to her honor—and is frustrated that no one else reads the way she does. Her sense of physical isolation is amplified by her self-willed fantasy in which no one else participates. She writes her own story that no one else cares to read.

Modern critics continue to be interested in the phenomena that influence reader absorption, imitation and application. Rita Felski in *Uses of Literature* describes related phenomenological features of reading and encourages modern critics to rethink the effect and use of books (7). Her categories of inquiry include recognition, enchantment,

knowledge and shock. She is joined in this renewed interest by other modern scholars whose books have similar titles and whose investigative interests parallel Felski's.[22] The current renewed interest in reading's effects suggests these topics are important for twenty-first-century scholars. Marta Kvande in her essay "Reading Female Readers" argues that readers should be able to read in two ways:

> Lennox's narrator seems to expect the authorial audience to be able to shift easily between conventions and genres, just as she can—and as Arabella can't. If Arabella is a model of bad reading, then, the narrator is a model of good reading. The eighteenth-century reader of *The Female Quixote* needed to be able to recognize the conventions of romance to a certain extent in order to be able to get the joke; to see the joke as funny, the reader also needed to understand those conventions as fiction. (229)

For Lennox and Kvande, the act of reading novels encourages multiple levels of perception. At one level, there is entertainment that produces enjoyment. There is cognitive participation at another level that finds readers sorting textual ambiguity, a process that increasingly develops reader sophistication. Felski's description of *enchantment* while reading—that difficult-to-explain, semimagical power, that subdues readers—aptly describes Arabella's response to reading romances. Arabella, unlike the narrator and readers, doesn't distinguish between fictional and factual texts. Felski suggests this enchantment caused by reading continues to be one of the desirable effects readers expect while reading:

> Popular art is often accused of disorienting and bewitching its audience, calling up an association of art with magic that stretches back to antiquity. The novel is the genre most frequently accused of casting a spell on its readers; like a dangerous drug, it lures them away from their everyday lives in search of heightened sensations and undiluted pleasures. Disoriented by the power of words, readers are no longer able to distinguish between reality and imagination; deprived of their reason, they act like mad persons and

[22] These include Joshua Landy's *How to Do Things with Fictions*, Mark Edmundson's *Why Read*? and J. Hillis Miller's *On Literature*. Each of these theorists points with renewed interest in reader affect and effects.

> fools. *Don Quixote* inaugurates a swathe of novels anxious to diagnose the dangers of such mind-altering fictions while advertising themselves as their cure. (53)

This is precisely what happens to Arabella. Her reading "lures her away" from everyday life. She has been thoroughly "disoriented by the power of words . . . and is no longer able to distinguish between reality and imagination." Lennox like other eighteenth-century authors employs her novel to point to the *cure,* as much as to the *cause*.

Lennox encourages readers to laugh at Arabella's narrow reading and application. However, she also engenders sympathy for her by pointing periodically to her intellectual and rhetorical growth; Arabella is sometimes fooled by her limited reading, but she is not a fool. Lennox presents her as a capable, intelligent, inquisitive and perceptive woman. The narrator relates the esteem that men have for Arabella. "The Marquis, having had frequent Occasions of admiring his Daughter's Eloquence, did not draw any unpleasing Conclusion from the nice Distinctions she made" (Lennox 28). The Marquis reflects on conversations he has with his daughter and her rapid advancement in all educational endeavors. She was, after all, the product of his teaching and that of tutors that he had hired. "At Four Years of Age he took her from under the Direction of the Nurses and Women appointed to attend her, and permitted her to receive no Part of her Education from another, which he was capable of giving her himself" (Lennox 6). He taught her to read and write in only a few months. He noticed that she had "An Uncommon Quickness of Apprehension and an Understanding capable of great Improvements" (6). In addition to providing the best "Masters of Music and Dancing," she was taught French and Italian Languages and had a "great Proficiency in all useful Knowledge" (7). In short, she was a prodigy with an extremely comprehensive education—for a woman.

Mr. Glanville, though biased by his love for Arabella, appreciates the quality of her mind and education.[23] Only on the subject of courtship and chivalry is her reading distorted. Another feature of Arabella's intellectual capacity is her prodigious catalogue of historical "facts" and precedents. Whenever she is faced with a choice of actions, she minutely recalls literary precedents and applies them to her own circumstance. Her breadth and depth of precedents and her ability to recall them instantly suggests her abilities are equal to contemporary barristers. Her application of precedents often precipitates mistakes, but her ability to recall details is impressive.[24] Lennox suggests that Arabella's education and analytical mind makes her a near-peer with educated men.

Arabella's naïve reading and assimilation of romances diminishes her ability to see the world from other perspectives, but that same reading also gives her pleasure, creates adventures and makes her an interesting conversationalist. Her reading also facilitates her ability to compare, distinguish and contrast one thing with another. This includes the ability to compare and contrast modern and ancient society. She increasingly demonstrates rational judgments not expected in eighteenth-century women. Felski defines and then refutes this gender bias:

> Women are often seen as especially prone to such acts of covert manipulation. Susceptible and suggestible, lacking intellectual distance and mastery over their emotions, they are all too easily swept up in a world of intoxicating allusions. Aesthetic enchantment leads inexorably to ontological confusion, to a disturbing failure to differentiate between fact and fantasy, reality and wish fulfillment. (53)

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[23] She [walked] with him for several Hours in the Garden, leaning upon his Arm; and charmed him to the last Degree of Admiration by the agreeable Sallies of her Wit, and her fine Reasoning upon every Subject he proposed (46).

[24] Mr. Glanville, "Contemplating the surprising Effect these Books had produced in the Mind of his Cousin; who, had she been untainted with the ridiculous Whims they created in her Imagination, was, in his Opinion, one of the most accomplished Ladies in the World" (50).

Felski explains this is not her assessment; rather, it is one she challenges. I argue that Lennox, too, challenges this version of gender bias. In the novel, Lennox first demonstrates that men *and* women are susceptible to the enchantment of reading. Then she points to two women, Lucy, her maid, and the Countess, who are better readers and who contribute significantly to Arabella's maturation. If Arabella is a poor reader, it is not because she is a woman. Rather, it results from her poor reading conditions and narrow choice of genre, factors that would produce equally bad male readers. Attentive readers understand that, while her condition is presented in the extreme, Arabella's malady is a sympathetic one—one that potentially affects all readers, not just women.

Reading Imperfect Characters

Felski rehearses then discredits the "pre-modern supposition that art should uplift its audience by depicting virtuous and unblemished persons" (47). Arabella, while fully concerned with her virtue, is still an imperfect woman in terms of her self-directed reasoning. Felski suggests in her chapter on *Recognition* that readers need not expect they can only learn from "virtuous and unblemished persons." She argues that characters who are not wholly like us, even the severely flawed and pathetic, can stimulate moments of recognition. She explains:

> In modernity, however, we are often drawn to literary texts for quite other reasons, including their willingness to catalog the extent of our duplicities, deceptions, and destructive desires. While the language of positive images is an understandable reaction to a historical archive of malicious or salacious representations, it enacts its own form of symbolic violence in erasing the complexity and many-sidedness of persons and censoring contradictory impulses or inadmissible yearnings. (48)

As I discuss in Chapter 1, this is an under-represented argument about the necessity of complexity and ambiguity in reading. Quintilian, Milton and Barbauld argue that readers

possess the ability to parse competing visions of good and bad, moral and immoral, virtue and vice. More importantly, they argue that the process of distinguishing, categorizing and differentiating is essential in developing critical reading skills, which are a component of practical life-negotiating abilities. I argue that this is one of the important ideas that Lennox displays in *The Female Quixote*. Furthermore, I submit that Lennox's primary concern is not rescuing silly young girls from naïve novel reading; rather, she wants to create readers that recognize avatars of their own desires and deceptions.

While Lennox acknowledges partial assimilation of Cervantes' concerns in her novel, e.g., "The bad Effects of a whimsical Study; which, some will say, is borrowed from Cervantes," Lennox's *Quixote* is different from the original in important ways—Cervantes' Don Quixote, as a *man*, can be a knight errant. He can physically involve himself in his community with varying results. He can invent the scenarios and move from one location to another to seek adventure. Arabella, as a *woman*, can only imagine and hope that she will find real-life adventures like the ones she has experienced in reading romances. However, as a *woman* in eighteenth-century England, she can only participate in adventures within the already available small circle of neighbors and relatives. She cannot wander around the countryside. To create adventures within her ordinary familiar group, she adapts her book-reading understanding onto the familiar people with whom she associates. Don Quixote projects his fictions similarly, but his range of options is much greater. They both, however, imagine adventures where there are none. In applying their imaginative reading to their prosaic circumstances, they write their own romances. That Lennox creates a new romance, suggests that her critique in this novel is less about the genre; rather, it is about bad reading—reading that fails to

analyze context and that imagines fictional content having application for the reader.

Many Readers

Reading and storytelling in this novel are closely related activities. The central characters *read* narratives and people and they tell their own and others' stories. Each character's conversations and behavior create texts that others must interpret. Lennox is interested in the ways that reading affects readers. The process of reading for Lennox includes not only the ability to read books but especially the ability to *read people*. She creates some characters who can read books and people only at the surface level. These are naïve, unskilled readers who do not evaluate well what they read—in books or people. Arabella is the primary person in this category. The narrator explains that "Her Glass . . . always shewed her a Form so extremely lovely, that not finding herself engaged in such Adventures as were common to the Heroines in the Romances she read, often complained of the Insensibility of Mankind, upon whom her Charms seemed to have so little Influence" (7). Arabella develops the ideas of who she is through her book reading and her periodic gaze in the mirror. Her mirror can only tell her about her appearance, not anything about her subjective self. The mirror as employed in novels is a multi-dimensional trope. Gazing into the mirror suggests vanity, but it also suggests self inquiry. In Arabella's case, her vanity overrides her inquiry. Ellen Gardiner suggests, "Arabella does not merely consume the discourse of romance; she attempts to reproduce it within the world of her experience . . . Arabella imagines herself owning a language which gives her the power of life and death. She asks at one point, "Shall I . . . make myself the author of his death?" (Gardiner 99). Both the book and the mirror might teach Arabella if they were one of several sources of knowledge. She needs to gather and

synthesize from other inputs—especially from those in her familiar circle.

Arabella does experience rare moments in which she recognizes discrepancies in her own system of reading. "She often complained," the narrator explains, that others are not moved by her beauty. This is one of a few places where Arabella's inner conflict between what she reads and what she experiences is exposed. Arabella's ultimate renunciation of the imaginary image of herself begins with these small inconsistencies. Felski speaks to the unreliability of gazing in the mirror, which she conflates with looking at ourselves through the context of a novel:

> Mirrors do not always flatter; they can take us off our guard, pull us up short, and reflect our image in unexpected ways and from unfamiliar angles. Many of the works we call tragic, for example, relentlessly pound home the refractoriness of human subjectivity, the often disastrous gap between intentions and outcomes, the ways in which persons commonly misjudge themselves and others. We can value literary works precisely because they force us—in often unforgiving ways—to confront our failings and blind spots rather than shoring up our self-esteem. (48)

The image Arabella sees in the mirror is as much a creation of her mind as a reflection of her body. She sees herself not only as beautiful but overlays the idea acquire from books that she is desirable—therefore powerful.

Lennox presents and critiques other readers, as well. Sir George for instance is as familiar with the romance novels. He, however, is neither a naïve nor a disinterested reader. Sir George's familiarity with romances produces a thorough comprehension of fictional style, content and tone. This enables him to create and narrate his own imitative adventures by which he hopes to impress his listeners, especially Arabella. His own reasoned abilities to read books and people allow him to perform as a dangerous manipulator. He is an accurate reader, but he is a deceiving storyteller. More than any other of Arabella's family and friends, Sir George understands the cause of her behavior,

but he does not intend to cure her. He aims to use her naivety to his advantage. The narrator explains, "Sir George, […] resolved to profit by the Knowledge of her Foible" (120). "While these things passed at the Castle, Sir George was meditating on the Means he should use to acquire the Esteem of Lady Bella, on whose Person he was a little enamoured, but of her Fortune a great deal more" (129).[25] Not relying on her audience's ability to discover Sir George's motives, the narrator describes his treacherous plans:

> Fraught therefore with the Knowledge of all the Extravagances and Peculiarities in those Books, he resolved to make his Addresses to Arabella in the Form they prescribed; and, not having Delicacy enough to be disgusted with the Ridicule in her Character, served himself with her Foible, to effect his Designs. (130)

Sir George represents and enacts the view that women can be enticed by books. Hoping to acquire Arabella's fortune and body, he creates a romance narrative designed to make him an object of her esteem. Early in the novel, he only narrates his own history, complete with secret identities and romantic interludes. Significantly, that effort fails because he demonstrates inconsistency in love for his fictional heroines. Near the end of the novel, he augments his narrative by employing an actress to relate a fictional and derogatory prehistory of Mr. Glanville. The narrator ensures her audience will understand Sir George's deception but leaves it to the reader's judgment whether Arabella will detect the deception.

Arabella's family and friends also read and interpret her behavior and pronouncements. They demonstrate varying ability to read with sophistication. The short

[25] By the Observations he had made on her Behaviour, he discovered her peculiar Turn: He was well read in Romances himself . . . he was perfectly well acquainted with the chief Characters in most of the *French* Romances; could tell everything that was borrowed from them in all the new Novels that came out; and [he was] a very accurate Critic (129-130).

list of good readers includes the Countess, whom Arabella meets, in Bath and the "Pious and Learned Doctor," who attends to Arabella's physical, spiritual and mental maladies in London. It is significant that these two good readers are the ones most able to eventually help Arabella understand the nonhistoricity and nonapplicability of romance novels. Their ability to read and discern texts and people enable them to create useful conversations that reorient Arabella. What is important about their influence on Arabella is the conversations they create. These reduce the isolation of Arabella's view and introduce new possibilities about how to read fiction.

The other interlocutors in Arabella's world include Lucy, Arabella's maid and ill-preforming confidant; Mr. Glanville, Arabella's primary suitor; Charlotte Glanville, Mr. Glanville's sister and Arabella's cousin, who is cast as Arabella's opponent and competitor; and Sir Charles Glanville, Arabella's uncle. Each of them have varying abilities to read people and narrate stories. Mr. Glanville is the only one who reads Arabella accurately. He understands the source of her ideas and he frames his discourse frequently in words that fit Arabella's imaginary world. While he understands the *cause* of Arabella's eccentricities, unfortunately, he is not shrewd enough to create a *cure*.

Lucy, Arabella's maid and confidant, performs the role of Sancho, Don Quixote's squire. It is her second set of perspectives about letters, events and behaviors that creates the humorous tension between the evident and the imaginary. Like Sancho, she demonstrates an ability to negotiate among ambiguous narratives. She demonstrates repeatedly that she does not possess talent for creative storytelling. Her own life experiences provide the only stable basis for her judgments. What Lucy sees is what Lucy says. She believes for instance that the gardener accused of stealing fish is quite

capable of that crime. The undeniable facts in the case were that he was caught with the purloined fish in his hands. To her there can be no other explanation that fits the evidence. Her performance in the novel argues against the silly-woman characterization.

Two Narrators

There are 92 chapters in *The Female Quixote*. Twenty-two chapters—nearly one quarter—engage the reader with suggestions on difficulties to be examined and explanations about complexities that the reader might miss without the assistance of the narrator. Another six chapters are self-reflexive authorial choices that the narrator commends to readers for their censure or approval. Birke adds, "Twenty-five [address] the act of storytelling or a type of writing issue" (224). The chapter titles exist as separate rational explanations of events, dialog and structure. The explanatory titles contrasted with the perplexing chapter activities give the reader a sense of two narrators—one who is relating Arabella's views and the other who is providing objective and reflective commentary. This dual narration—that sometimes conflicts and sometimes complements the narrative—provides a structure in which Lennox argues that quixotic reading is detrimental, while concurrently arguing that reading *her* novel is instructional and formative. This mode encourages reader participation to observe what appears on the surface—the simple narration of action and dialog—as merely an entertaining stream of thought in which important critical ideas are carried. Lennox wants her readers to focus on inconsistencies and ambiguities and to resolve them. She also humorously assists readers—some of whom might not understand all of the content in the chapter. In this practice, Lennox demonstrates that the lessons from her novel are to be derived as much from the story of the novel as from the explicit didactic work. Birke concludes:

> All of these works engage with the notion that fiction can make an important contribution to the project of self-cultivation, be it predominantly cognitive, moral or emotional. Each in its own way seeks to find an adequate shape for the then newly emerging genre of the novel—and uses the chapter titles to provide a running commentary on this endeavor. (228)

In one instance, Lennox declares a chapter, "Being, in the Author's Opinion, the best Chapter in this History." She states this is what I think. What do you think? Lennox solicits reader evaluation here and points to limits of authorial power. Lennox initiates conversations in which she engages readers as co-participants in thinking how novels should work. Lennox wants her audience to read better than Arabella.

Conditions Affecting Reading

Though Arabella's isolated circumstances are exaggerated, Lennox uses them to point to conditions that potentially affect readers. These include literary content, reader maturity and reading conditions. *Literary content* includes the features that compose the text including complexity, ambiguity, character development, tone and register. *Reader maturity* encompasses the age and ability of the reader as well as the breadth of reading and comprehension of genre distinctions. *Reading conditions* are those social and familial contexts that either assist the individual reader or in their absence allow the reader to make judgments without interaction.

Literary Content

Does the text describe characters and events unequivocally, or does it encourage reader analysis and synthesis to create comprehension? What is the specified purpose of the book? Does the narrative support the stated purpose or work against it? Does the narrative purport to be a history or is it a work of purely imaginary creation? Arabella's

Romances purport to be histories though more experienced readers would find them improbable. It is her inability to distinguish literary content and to sort fiction from fact that contributes so significantly to Arabella's poor reading. Arabella believes the romances are histories, because she has no comparative texts to employ as buffers.

Reader Maturity

When novels employ complexity and ambiguity, readers must assemble trial synopses that best account for the details. Then they must sort the relationship between these initial conceptions and the rest of the narrative. Incrementally, as they develop better reading skills, they can distinguish texts that are didactic, parodic, serious or humorous. Samuel Johnson comments on these processes:

> In the romances formally written, every transaction and sentiment was so remote from all that passes among men that the reader was in very little danger of making any applications to himself; the virtues and crimes were equally beyond his sphere of activity; and he amused himself with heroes and with traders, deliverers and persecutors, as with beings of another species, whose actions were regulated upon motives of their own and who had neither faults nor excellencies in common with himself. (Johnson 156)

He suggests that these kinds of books may amuse but that they provide no rational model for human behavior. What is deficient in Johnson's argument is that he assumes that his readers will all see and understand the improbability of the narrative, which will render them free from its influence. This is the specific deficiency—lack of reader maturity—that Lennox explores. Johnson assumes that typical readers would read romances with disinterest since the conditions and events are remote from personal experience. What he does not consider is that a person like Arabella *wants* to believe the texts and overlay her prosaic life with the adventure it lacks. Her hunger for adventure supersedes the supposed divide between evident fiction and reality. Johnson is more fearful than hopeful

concerning the power of novels to influence. He allows that novels might be more effective in displaying and teaching virtue, but he imagines the danger of unregulated writers posing a greater danger. He worries that young readers have not yet developed an inner moral compass that would reliably direct them to emulate the good and eschew the bad. His solution is self-imposed censorship.[26] What Johnson fears and Lennox depicts is a power over the mind, "a kind of violence" that "produce[s] effects almost without the intervention of the will." This is a worrisome potential—an unknowable, uncontrollable effect in the mind. Johnson's solution is prohibition of dangerous texts—essentially a kind of censorship and licensing that will minimize the danger. Johnson suggests, "Protect the reader." Lennox suggests, "Mature the reader."

In *The Female Quixote,* Lennox creates a hybrid heroine. Arabella's life is controlled by the *divine machinery* of the author; she is virtually imprisoned and isolated by her father's own romantic withdrawal into a self-created Arcadian existence. Arabella is trapped in one romance narrative but wants to create another of her own making. This authorial tension allows Lennox to create a conflicted character, one who entertains readers but also one in whom readers find threads of common experience and desire. Through Arabella, Lennox points to the dangers *and* benefits of reading. Lennox is more hopeful than fearful about the novel's potential. Lennox reasons that, if reading can stimulate powerful responses in the mind that alter behavior negatively, couldn't novels also influence behavior positively?

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[26] For this reason these familiar histories may perhaps be made of greater use than the solemnities of professed morality, and convey the knowledge of vice and virtue with more efficacy than axioms and definitions. But, if the power of example is so great as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited; and that which is likely to operate so strongly should not be mischievous or uncertain in its effects (157).

Reading Conditions

Arabella's madness is not entirely of her own creation. The narrator explains that she is a second-generation recluse. Her isolation is imposed on her by a father, who "resolved to quit all Society" (5). To accomplish this, he buys a castle in "a very remote Province of the Kingdom, in the Neighbourhood of a small Village, and several Miles distant from any Town" (5, 6). Adding to the strangeness of the castle, the Marquis applied "the most laborious Endeavours of Art . . . to make it appear like the beautiful Product of wild, uncultivated Nature" (6). The text continues to explain that the Marquis never entertained guests on the property. To add to Arabella's isolation, the narrator kills Arabella's mother three days after childbirth. Consequently, Arabella fills her lonely hours with reading. It is important to observe the reciprocal effects in the isolation. While Arabella's isolation and boredom led to her reading, her reading in *isolation* led to bad reading. About this kind of reading, Felski explains, "Romance in its various guises undoubtedly feeds a craving to be totally loved or unconditionally admired, proffering a momentary release from the reign of the mediocre and mundane, from the endless drudgery of daily compromise and concession" (62). Here Felski identifies the power of reading Romances as reflected especially in *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*. It of course describes the quixote Arabella equally. She wants to be "totally loved"—she would not even mind being worshiped—and she demonstrates a constant desire to be "unconditionally admired." Arabella's reading is not disinterested; it is understandably escapist. She wants to experience the admiration she observes in romances. I argue that the power to shape Arabella's desires does not originate completely in the books that she reads. Rather, her already established patterns of boredom and isolation prepare her for

reception of escapist ideation and romantic adventures, and the books she reads feed this desire. She experiences all three detriments to reading—challenging literary content, immature reading and isolated conditions. These are the points of weakness that Lennox traces and corrects in Arabella's ascent toward better reading.

Ascent toward Better Reading

Lennox's traces concurrently the negative impact of Arabella's simple reading and the positive benefits derived as well. While much of the early novel points to the results of Arabella's foolish and uncritical reading, later in the novel, she exhibits positive skills that she acquired from that same reading. These are most clearly depicted during her visit to Bath and particularly in her conversations with Mr. Selvin and Mr. Tinsel (Books VII & VIII). In the early chapters, Arabella's invention of abductors and lovers occupies most of her thoughts. In Bath, however, these adventures are replaced with conversations. In these conversations, Lennox shows that reading romances has shaped Arabella's reasoning and judgment in positive ways. Arabella's critique of eighteenth- century social behavior are eloquent and perceptive.

At her first public Ball, Arabella engages in conversation with two of her Cousin's acquaintances—Mr. Selvin and Mr. Tinsel. The narrator explains that "[Arabella] did not doubt but he [Mr. Tinsel] knew the Adventures of many Persons whom they were viewing; and that he would do her a Pleasure, if he would relate some of them" (274). Here Arabella reveals her continuing interest in reading, and hopes that Mr. Tinsel will be an excellent narrator of Adventures. What Arabella does not recognize is the multiple possible uses of the word *adventure*. It is in this chapter that Arabella begins to experience the tensions upon which the resolution of the novel are constructed. The

stories Arabella hears in Bath are *public* narrations—ones that others hear simultaneously and participate in determining meaning. This is a significant change from Arabella's isolated reading. The dialogs are the first step toward better reading for Arabella. The stories she hears in Bath are less decipherable; she also observes that others understand the content and *intent* of the stories better. This is an important moment when Arabella's realizes that her self-directed reading is less capable than her interlocutors. This early experience in argument prepares her to be receptive to others' interpretations of texts—particularly the Countess and the learned doctor.

Arabella invites Mr. Glanville and Miss Charlotte Glanville to listen to Mr. Tinsel's narration with her, which she thinks will be a "more rational Amusement than Dancing" (274). Mr. Glanville suspects the salacious content of Mr. Tinsel's stories. Lennox prepares readers to suspect Mr. Tinsel's tales as well—by naming him *Tinsel*. Mr. Glanville warns Arabella about the disparity between her wishes and the narratives she is about to receive. He remembers the false story that Sir George had told Arabella and suspects Mr. Tinsel's will be worse. Arabella protests the innocence of her request and explains her motivation:

> Why so, sir, replied Arabella, since it is not an indiscreet Curiosity which prompts me to a Desire of hearing the Histories Mr. Tinsel has promised to entertain me with; but rather Hope of hearing something which may at once improve and delight me; something which may excite my Admiration, engage my Esteem, or influence my Practice. (274)

In this declaration, Lennox places in Arabella's own words the purposes, which regulate Arabella's reading. She takes Romances as models of instruction. She expects that Mr. Tinsel's stories will provide similar instruction. The content of Mr. Tinsel's stories, however, does not conform to the patterns of Arabella's previous reading. She realizes,

too late, that Mr. Tinsel's narratives are not of the same genre. His stories are about sexual *adventures*.

It is especially in these conversations at Bath that Lennox builds reader sympathy for her unfortunate quixote. After a previous conversation in Bath, during which Arabella successfully refutes the superficial reading of Mr. Selvin, Sir Charles communicates his astonishment and approval for Arabella's rhetorical capacities.[27] Mr. Glanville adds his commendation:

> One would not imagine, interrupted Mr. *Glanville*, who saw *Arabella* in some Confusion at the coarse Praise her Uncle gave her that my Cousin should speak so accurately of a Quality she never practices: and 'tis easy to judge by what she has said, that nobody can railly finer than herself, if she pleases. (269)

Lenox demonstrates that her quixote, like the original, often says things that are wise and appropriate. She increasingly points to Arabella's developing reasoning and her ability to participate and compete at a level equal with her male opponents. Mr. Glanville's prediction about the content of Mr. Tinsel's narratives proves correct. Mr. Tinsel relates the sordid and secret backgrounds of several fine ladies. Through his narratives Lennox points to an additional feature of reading—in this case, the difficulty of knowing a person by external appearance only. This is a continuation of the argument the narrator makes earlier about the work of mirrors. They only show the outside and are, therefore, limited at best, deceptive at worst. When Mr. Tinsel concludes his tales of adventure, Arabella is challenged, perhaps for the first time, to make sense not only of the content but of the

[27] I protest, lady *Bella*, said Sir Charles, who had listened to her with many Signs of Admiration, you speak like an Orator (269).

reasons Mr. Tinsel chose these narratives.[28] "Did I not tell you, Madam, interrupted Mr. Glanville, that the Amusement you had chose was not so innocent as Dancing? What a deal of Scandal has Mr. Tinsel utter'd in the Compass of a few Minutes" (276)? This is an important determinative moment in Arabella's own education. She listens to a narrative that is not of her own choosing. She understands that multiple meanings can be assembled from a word. Significantly, she *reads* these stories in a group with others. Mr. Glanville, Arabella and Charlotte offer their individual assessments. Arabella for the first time cannot find anything in these stories that apply to her and she is at a loss for words. Mr. Glanville attempts to ameliorate that silence with a mitigating comment:

> I think, however, Madam, said Mr. *Glanville*, we may allow that there is a negative Merit in the Relations Mr. *Tinsel* has made; for, if he has not shewn us any Thing to approve, he has at least shewn us what to condemn. (276)

If Arabella cannot make sense of *Tinsel's Tales*, she will do her best to expound on the theme upon which Mr. Glanville stumbles. In a lengthy oration, Arabella (Lennox) communicates her expectations about the way that vice and virtue should be portrayed. This particular lecture closely approximates the ideas in Johnson's *Ramblers #4* and *#37*, both of which had been published in 1750, during the time Lennox's was writing her novel. Arabella's oration rehearses Johnson's commentary about the novel and about types of readers.

> The Ugliness of Vice, replied Arabella, ought only to be represented to the Vicious; to whom Satire, like a magnifying Glass, may aggravate every Defect, in order to make its Deformity appear more hideous; but since it's End is only to reprove and amend, it should never be address'd to any but those who come with in its Correction, and may be the better for it: a

[28] I assure you, I know not what to make of the Histories he has been relating. I think they do not deserve that Name, and are rather detached Pieces of Satire on particular Persons, than a serious Relation of Facts. I confess my Expectations from this Gentleman have not been answer'd (276).

> virtuous Mind need not be shown the Deformity of Vice, to make it be hated and avoided; the more pure and uncorrupted our Ideas are, the less shall we be influenc'd by Example. A natural Propensity to Virtue or Vice often determines the Choice: 'Tis sufficient therefore to show a good Mind what it ought to pursue, though a bad one must be told what to avoid. In a Word, one ought to be always incited, the other always restrained. (277)

This is another instance in which Arabella's reasoning is shown to be acute. Beginning with the kernel of an idea expressed by Mr. Glanville, she constructs a lesson on how vice and virtue should be expressed in literature. Arabella proves to be a good student in her conversations with the Countess and with the Learned Doctor. These are occasions where Lennox contrasts Arabella's former isolated reading and shows the benefit of participative discourse. The partial advancement of Arabella's reading sophistication is important preparation for her London experiences, which are among her worst adventures—her poor reading there almost results in hers and Sir George's deaths.

Benefits from Reading

Lennox demonstrates how Arabella's developing analytical skills are beginning to help her negotiate the society she observes in Bath. After she had experienced her first Ball, Sir Charles asks how she liked the "fashionable Amusements:"

> Why, truly, sir, replied she, smiling, I have brought away no great Relish for a Renewal of the Amusement I have partaken of To-night. If the World, in which you seem to think I am but new initiated, affords only these Kinds of Pleasures, I shall very soon regret the Solitude and Books I have quitted. (279)

Sir Charles cannot understand why Arabella isn't delighted by her conversations with the many interesting people they meet in Bath and why the activities would not be a means of providing entertainment for Arabella. These questions prepare the audience—those at Bath and Lennox's readers—for Arabella's second oration. In this one, she critiques and

indicts the behaviors she has observed:

> I am of Opinion, replied Arabella that one's Time is far from being well employ'd in the Manner you portion it out: And People who spend theirs in such trifling Amusements, must certainly live to very little Purpose. What room, I pray you, does a Lady give for high and noble Adventures, who consumes her Days in Dressing, Dancing, listening to Songs, and ranging the Walks with People as thoughtless as herself? How mean and contemptible a Figure must a Life spent in such idle Amusements make in History? Or rather, are not such Persons always buried in Oblivion, and can any Pen be found who would condescend to record such inconsiderable Actions? Nor can I persuade myself, added she, that any of those Men whom I saw at the Assembly, with Figures so feminine, Voices so soft, such tripping Steps, and unmeaning Gestures, have over signalized either their Courage or Constancy; but might be overcome by their enemy in Battle, or be false to their Mistress in Love. (279)

In this lengthy critique, Arabella demonstrates that her reading of Romances has shaped ideas about character and behavior that now compose higher standards than those she observed among visitors at Bath. Lennox shows that her heroine's reading does not always result in bad judgments. Arabella's reading has helped develop better taste for what is meaningful and pleasing. She can now compare the histories she reads with contemporary society. This is an important progression. In Arabella's early history Lennox points to the dangers of naïve reading. In Bath, Lennox points to the positive benefit afforded sophisticated readers to compare and synthesize derivative ideas. Here Lennox contends that the effects of novel reading are not as predetermined as Johnson fears. Rather, the results are effected by reader strategies. Her reading has proven to be formative and well as entertaining.

This is the kind of improvement that Joshua Landy suggest as the primary work of reading some texts. In *How to Do Things with Fictions*, he argues that one of the most

significant potential results of reading is the *formation* of critical reasoning skills.[29] He contends that reading certain kinds of fiction creates interactive sites (modes) that train our thinking. Similarly, Arabella develops instead an understanding that novels can create an evaluative space for comparing imaginative ideas with present experience.

The Countess's Contribution

The most significant conversation in Bath is with the Countess. The Countess hears that Arabella has become an object of derision. She realizes that Arabella's malady is one that she also had experienced. The Countess determines to rescue Arabella's reputation and then to attempt to rescue Arabella from her poor reading practices.[30] In addition to identifying the causes of Arabella's misreading—the kind of books she reads, her isolation, ignorance of the way the world works and her over-active imagination—the Countess also speaks about her own experiences and the things that contribute to her own improvement in reading—texts and experiences.

Ellen Gardiner explains that, "The Countess is among the most positive figures in

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[29] The way forward, as I see it, is to reinvigorate the pragmatic outlook in its broadly ethical, rather than narrowly moral, dimension. And that is precisely what I aim to do in this book, by highlighting a way of thinking about (some) fiction that is not exemplary, not affective, and not, properly speaking, cognitive either. There is, I will claim, a set of texts we might label "formative fictions," texts whose function it is to fine-tune our mental capacities. Rather than providing knowledge per se—whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation—what they give us is *know-how*; rather than transmitting beliefs, what they equip us with are *skills*; rather than teaching, what they do is *train*. They are not informative, that is, but formative. They present themselves as spiritual exercises (whether sacred or profane), spaces for prolonged and active encounters that serve, over time, to hone our abilities and thus, in the end, to help us become who we are (Landy 10).

[30] She resolv'd to rescue her from the ill-natur'd Raillery of her Sex; praising therefore her Understanding, and the Beauty of her Person with a Sweetness and Generosity peculiar to herself, she accounted in the most delicate Manner imaginable for the Singularity of her Notions, from her Studies, her Retirement, her Ignorance of the World, and her lively Imagination. And to abate the Keenness of their Sarcasms, acknowledg'd, that she herself had when very young, been deep read in Romances; and but for an early Acquaintance with the World, and being directed to other Studies, was likely to have been as much a Heroine as lady *Bella* (323).

the text for Lennox, because, as a woman, she knows how to negotiate between the language of romance and that of the novel" (104). The Countess states that she became acquainted with the world at an early age. This acquaintance suggests that the Countess had the advantage of interaction with other people to shape her understanding of what she read. Additionally, she had been *directed* to other studies. Consequently, she could compare and contrast readings. As a mentor, the Countess empathizes with Arabella's romantic imagination. The Countess is the first person who speaks—and perhaps thinks—like Arabella. The Countess presents three critiques of romances. First she states that current times are vastly different than the times of the romantic heroines.[31] Next she explains that events portrayed in Romantic literature have not occurred for "several Thousand Years." She suggests, "People unlearn'd in Antiquity would be apt to deem them idle Tales, so improbable do they appear at present" (326). Finally, she corrects Arabella's misuse and misunderstanding of the word *adventure*, a word that Arabella has already determined to have multiple conflicting uses.[32] With these arguments, the Countess begins to build a rational architecture for Arabella that will eventually be used to evaluate arguments against the historicity of romances. It is significant that Arabella is not instantly reformed by the Countess' arguments. She pushes back against the Countess' arguments, engaging in an exploratory conversation. Arabella argues that customs don't change. The Countess contends that customs do change. The word *custom*

[31] When one reflects upon the dangerous Adventures to which Persons of their Quality were expos'd in those Times, one cannot help rejoicing that we live in an Age in which the Customs, Manners, Habits, and Inclinations differ so widely from theirs, that 'tis impossible such Adventures should even happen (326).

[32] The Word *Adventure* carries in it so free and licentious a Sound in the Apprehensions of People at this Period of Time, that it can hardly with Propriety be apply'd to those view and natural Incidents which compose the History of a Woman of Honour (326).

becomes another that Arabella realizes has multiple meanings.[33] Arabella wonders, "Are the Heroes of Antiquity, bad men?" The Countess answers, "Judging them by the Rules of Christianity, and our present Notions of Honour, Justice, and Humanity, they certainly are" (328).[34] The Countess' primary critiques concern customs, semantics and moral references. She introduces Arabella to a valuable set of diagnostic tools. The effect on Arabella is not yet a complete. Rather, "The Countess's Discourse had rais'd a Kind of Tumult in her Thoughts, which gave an Air of Perplexity to her lovely Face" (328). While the result is tumult now, the rational tools the Countess puts in place assist Arabella later to understand the Learned Doctor's critique of Romance novels.

Landy elaborates on the process of creating rational evaluative tools in readers. Though his comments are not directed specifically toward *The Female Quixote* or even toward novels, the logic of his argument applies equally to Arabella's inadequate initial use of fiction. Landy argues that readers need the means to develop tools that will help eliminate false opinions and that will help them learn how to think:

> I propose . . . the end goal for Plato is not the mere acquisition of superior understanding but instead a well-lived *life*, where living well is taken to involve being in harmony with oneself. For such an end, accurate opinions are necessary but not sufficient: what one crucially needs is a *method*, a procedure for ridding oneself of those opinions that are false…If we have a predisposition for detecting and are interested in resolving conflicts within a set of beliefs—if, that is, we instinctively posit logical consistency as the

[33] Custom, said the Countess smiling, changes the very Nature of Things, and what was Honourable a thousand years ago, may probably be look'd upon as infamous now—a Lady in the heroic Age you speak of, would not be thought to possess any great Share of Merit, if she had not been many times carried away by one or other of her insolent Lovers: Whereas a Beauty in this could not pass thro' the Hands of several different Ravishers, without bringing an Imputation on her Chastity. The same Actions which made a Man a Hero in those Times, would constitute him a Murderer in These—And the same Steps which led him to a Throne Then, would infallibly conduct him to a Scaffold Now (328).

[34] Such are the Actions which immortalize the Heroes of Romance, and are by the Authors of those Books styl'd glorious, godlike, and divine. Yet judging of them as Christians, we shall find them impious and base, and directly opposite to our present Notions of moral and relative Duties. 'Tis certain therefore . . . that what was Virtue in those Days, is Vice in ours (328).

> desideratum in life—then we stand to learn, when we read the dialogues, not only *what* to think, but also, and far more importantly, *how* to think. (Landy 11)

Landy's and Lennox's arguments converge on this important idea. Reading especially literature is not primarily a didactic or pedantic activity. Rather, the process of reading some books creates environments in which readers are encouraged to become better thinkers and, therefore, better people. *Better readers* are those who instinctively, because of practice, are able to improve and exercise their skills in *how* to *think* as a result of their sophisticated reading. Lennox's description of the effects of the Countess's arguments is an example of the slow process of formation that Landy articulates. The Countess doesn't tell Arabella *what* to think. Rather, she helps Arabella consider possibilities. She begins to equip her with new perspectives about history, semantics and a broader set of readings that will help her to identify logical inconsistencies.

While the Countess is performing this task for Arabella, Lennox performs a similar task for her readers. Throughout the narrative, Lennox encourages readers to develop critical thinking and to pay attention to inconsistencies. She does not define *good* people and *bad* people for her readers. She describes events, such as the appearance of the highway men, and provides several opinions about their intentions. Arabella thinks they are knights who have come to protect her. Others in the coach think they are bandits whose intent is to rob Arabella and her family. Readers, by this point in the novel, make their own judgments by assigning levels of reliability to competing narrators. In this particular instance, even Arabella realizes that the men might have been the one or the other. Her intellectual growth now allows for uncertainty about her own conclusions.

Forming a New Understanding

The final formative discussion for Arabella is delivered by "A worthy Divine . . . The Pious and Learned Doctor _____" (366). He is summoned, because Arabella and her physicians believe that "There is little probability of her Recovery." While she does not die like Cervantes' Quixote, she does *die* to her former unsophisticated and self-reliant methods of reading. After the conversation with the Doctor, she is equipped with a greater understanding of how to judge books and greater reading and reasoning skills. While the Countess aimed at critiquing Arabella's limited experience and naïve reading, the Doctors critiques primarily the unreliability of romance novels. He is sensitive to Arabella's weak condition and avoids criticizing her. "He lamented pathetically the Ruin such a ridiculous Study had brought on so noble a Mind; and assur'd Mr. Glanville, he would spare no Endeavours to rescue it from so shocking a Delusion" (367). The Doctor acknowledges the strength of Arabella's mind and appeals to her reason.

This penultimate chapter is the longest in the novel. In fact, it is unusually long, being almost three times longer than any other chapter. It borrows from the structure of Plato's dialogs. The student, Arabella, asks questions of the Learned Doctor and the Doctor presents arguments to help the student develop skills for refuting falsehood. The Doctor helps Arabella know *what* to think, but he also teaches Arabella *how* to think. The Doctor first assesses Arabella's processing speed and accuracy.[35] He explains that she jumps to irrational and unsupported conclusions. The Doctor understands that Arabella must learn how to reason and refute if his counsel is going to have an enduring effect. He

[35] Your Imaginations, Madam, reply'd the Doctor, are too quick for Language; you conjecture too soon, what you do not wait to hear; and reason upon Suppositions which cannot be allow'd you (372).

asks for permission to address her as a scholar with the same vehemence and logic he would employ in an academic setting. This is highly complimentary of Arabella. In Lennox's view, Arabella has become a female scholar capable of engaging fruitfully in this dialog. The Doctor builds a foundation for subsequent arguments by pointing to the value of some books and critiquing the worthlessness of others. He values the ability of books to help develop rational skills but warns against books that retard development.[36] Lennox positions the Doctor as the strong proponent of the exemplary model. Johnson of course is the avatar for the Doctor.

After inviting Arabella to slow the pace of her thought processes and to value the power of *some* books to help regulate her decisions, he devotes the remainder of his argument to demonstrating that "Histories (romances) are Fictions; that they are absurd; and, that they are Criminal" (374). His argument against romances is that there are no validating documents that support these narratives. The French authors claim to have written their romances based on ancient records—ones that are unknown to any other scholars. The Doctor suggests to Arabella is that all reading should be contrasted with other sources. At this point in the argument, Arabella commits to abandon reading of fiction, if the romances are proven to be misrepresentations; she allows:

> Prove, therefore, that the Books which I have hitherto read as Copies of Life, and Models of conduct, are empty Fictions, and from this Hour I deliver them to Moths and Mould; and from this Time consider their Authors as Wretches who cheated me of those Hours I ought to have dedicated to Application and Improvement, and betrayed me to a Waste of those Years in which I might have laid up Knowledge of my future Life. (377)

[36] We can judge of the Future only by the Past . . . This Power of Prognostication, may, by Reading and Conversation, be extended beyond our own Knowledge: And the great Use of Books, is that of participating without Labour of Hazard the Experience of others (372).

This proviso opens the possibility for the Doctor—and Lennox—to close the argument and forbid reading of *any* fiction. This is not, however, the Doctor's conclusion. Rather, he continues the discussion of literature in general and novels specifically:

> Yet, though I cannot forgive these Authors for having destroyed so much valuable Time, yet I cannot think them intentionally culpable, because I cannot believe they expected to be credited [believed].Truth is not always injured by Fiction. An admirable Writer of our own Time, has found the Way to convey the most solid Instructions, the noblest Sentiments, and the most exalted Piety, in the pleasing Dress of a Novel, and to use the Words of the greatest Genius in the present Age, 'Has taught the Passions to move at the Command of Virtue.' (377)

The editor's note indicates that the "admirable Writer" is Samuel Richardson and the "Novel" is *Clarissa*. The "greatest Genius in the present Age" is of course Samuel Johnson. Johnson's quotation is from *Rambler No. 97*, published only a year before *The Female Quixote*. This is an interesting argument at many levels. First, Lennox ties her fictional narrative to real events and people. This augments the illusion that Arabella's story is a history. At the same time, she argues that there is a valuable role for fiction to play in reader development and she points to the contributions of Richardson and Johnson who have implicitly (in the novel) and explicitly (in the *Rambler* essays) proclaimed both the danger and the value of novel reading. An important point the Doctor makes is that "Truth is not always injured by Fiction." Lennox contends that reader flexibility is an adaptation that is learned in the process of reading. The Doctor concludes his arguments by pointing to the fictitious and absurd nature of the romances, specifically the discrepancies in the times various characters lived, the fictional geographical references and the impossibility of men to have the strength attributed to romantic heroes. The Doctor applies his most potent critique to the philosophy

encouraged by romances. He argues that the fictions about chronology, characters and geography are excusable—the false values are what make these novels criminal:

> These Books soften the Heart to Love, and harden it to Murder. That they teach Women to exact Vengeance, and Men to execute it; teach Women to expect not only Worship, but the dreadful Worship of human Sacrifices. Every Page of these Volumes is filled with such extravagance of Praise, and expressions of Obedience as on human Being ought not to hear from another. (380-81)

At this moment, Arabella's new set of rational tools helps her to evaluate romances differently and to consider her own reading practices in a new perspective.[37] She remembers her own requests to Mr. Glanville to kill her imagined ravishers. She questions now her own failure to consider the inconsistencies between the ancient accounts of barbaric traditions and the current morality suggested by Christianity and modern teaching of civic responsibility. When she says that "[her] Heart yields to the Force of Truth," she is experiencing the benefit of her new rational tools. She demonstrates the first signs of ability to read in a sophisticated way. We see also the long-term contribution of Lucy's reality-based reading.

End and Continuation

The final chapter in a few paragraphs ties together all of the character and thematic threads. Sir George reluctantly marries Charlotte Glanville; Arabella marries Mr. Glanville, securing the amalgamation of the two estates. Sir George admits and apologizes for his manipulative narrations. Arabella apologizes for her absurd readings. In some ways, this ending is unsubstantial, formulaic and hurried. In her final paragraph,

[37] My Heart yields to the Force of Truth, and I now wonder how the Blaze of Enthusiastic Bravery, could hinder me from remarking with Abhorrence the Crime of deliberate unnecessary Bloodshed (381).

however, Lennox opens a new discussion about *kinds of marriages*. She addresses her comments to the reader from within the text, not from the chapter titles:

> We chuse, Reader, to express this Circumstance, though the same, in different Words, as well to avoid Repetition, as to intimate that the first mentioned Pair [*Sir George and Charlotte*] were indeed only married in the common Acceptation of the Word; that is, they were privileged to join Fortunes, Equipages, Titles, and Expence; while Mr. Glanville and Arabella were united, as well in these, as in every Virtue and laudable Affection of the Mind. (383)

Lennox, proceeds to a new subject, if only briefly—kinds of marriages. These mid-eighteenth-century deliberations—reading's effects and the desirability of marrying well—are ones that Jane Austen continues to investigate in her novels. Lennox's greater interest—reader development—is her final word.[38] She continues her emphasis about reading to the last sentence. Her work prepares the way for other authors who will continue to articulate variations on the theme of becoming better readers.

[38] She explains to readers the variations in meanings of the word *marriage* as it applies to Sir George and Charlotte compared to the meaning of the word as it applies to Arabella and Mr. Glanville.

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CHAPTER 3

BELINDA – THE LIMITS OF IMAGINATION

"People always succeed best when they take characters
diametrically opposite to their own" (*Belinda* 19).

Introduction

When lady Delacour cites Clarence Hervey's maxim about how to choose a costume for a masquerade ball in the novel *Belinda* (1801), she foreshadows the central argument and organizing principle of Maria Edgeworth's first society novel.[39] Her most thoroughly developed characters are ones who adopt comprehensive external characters that are opposite from their interior and essential character. They act out their exterior performative persona in public, organizing their behavior around the associations created by their masks.

These masked performances engage the masquerade trope employed by other eighteenth-century novels, including Defoe's *Roxana*, Richardson's *Pamela* and Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (Lipski 33). *Belinda* relies heavily upon the analytical capacities that the masquerade trope makes available. Chapter one is titled "Characters." It names and describes many of the actors that will be seen throughout the novel. The title

[39] In the preface, Maria Edgeworth calls this story a Moral Tale; she specifically states that it is not a novel, explaining that novels contain folly, errour, and vice. She states that her story will be more beneficial and true, therefore not a novel as it is viewed at the time of her publication. Most modern critics refer to it as a novel, as will I throughout this chapter.

suggests themes of performance and theatricality. In this first chapter, the narrator describes what is evident about the characters—what their public knows about them. Chapter two, however, titled "Masks," suggests the theme of masquerade—those aspects of character not available to the public. Taken together, these two chapters announce the primary work of this novel—exploring the tension between characters' external performance, internal conflict and the dynamic relationship between the two spheres. Hervey's maxim permeates the text—actors assume outer behaviors that are "diametrically opposite" to their inner essential character.[40] It will be the work of others in the novel, especially Belinda, as well as Edgeworth's readers to identify deceptive outer personas and to synthesize an accurate estimate of the internal essential person. I argue that Edgeworth's *Belinda*, employing the masquerade trope, interrogates and challenges conceptions of quixotic reading depicted in previous literary and critical texts. She challenges the idea that fictional narratives can successfully overwrite essential selves in a permanent way. There are two important aspects of this claim. First, Edgeworth demonstrates the merit of rationally-based education that she previously described in *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795) and her co-authored tutorial,[41] *Essays on Practical Education* (1798). Within the developing form of the novel, Edgeworth wants to *show* how rational judgement trumps performative character, rather than *explain* the argument. She uses the novel's power of *showing* to depict the correction of performed

[40] Hervey is citing what others have said about masquerade. In 1729, the author of an article in the Universal Spectator wrote, "Everyone here wars a Habit which speaks him the Reverse of what her is." Terry Castle explains further, "Costume ideally represented an inversion of one's nature…if one may speak of the rhetoric of masquerade, a tropology of costume, the controlling figure was the antithesis: one was obliged to impersonate a being opposite, in some essential feature, to oneself" (Castle 5).

[41] This series of essays was written and published with the assistance of her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth.

personalities and the necessarily unsatisfying identification with fictional characters. She contends that a performed persona cannot be sustained under the pressure of real life experiences and objective examination—particularly that examination accomplished by others. She demonstrates that the essential self may be hidden in a masquerade of performance, but that it is not erased or overwritten.

Interpreting Signs

Edgeworth shows her readers through her characters that inner character being eclipsed by an outer façade eventually supersedes the exterior mask. In order for the characters to achieve internal harmony and social acceptability, they are compelled to reconcile their inner and outer representations of self. This is often precipitated in the novel by another actor comparing external performance with internal desire and identifying the discontinuities. Once identified, the conflict can potentially be resolved. Joe Bray explains:

> For the heroine of *Belinda* too, learning to distinguish the pictures of real life, from paintings of imaginary manners and passions which never had, which never can have, any existence is fundamental to her moral and intellectual development…the question of "reading," or interpretation, is especially relevant to the novel of manners. In this sub-genre, gestures words and actions—the dark glass through which we attempt to appear into souls of others—are constantly defined and redefined through acts of interpretation, and thus that for characters *in*, as well as readers *of* the novel of manners, interpretation is of crucial concern. (Bray 121-122)

This process of discovery in the novel parallels similar and parallel reader activity. Readers develop rational judgment capacity by evaluating the dichotomous characters. This reader development through sorting ambiguity in novels builds the same kind of rational capacity that Edgeworth models in *Belinda*. From a reader's perspective, initial clues about a character are overlaid sequentially with additional relevant or complicating

details. The discussion of the masquerade early in the novel alerts readers to identify complex double selves that extend beyond the simple ones depicted in their external behavior. While each character is increasingly revealed as a creature of complex internal and external competing selves, the reader participates in sorting the accumulated perceptions in order to assemble a composite understanding and sympathy for the bifurcated characters. Deborah Weiss suggests that what Edgeworth wants to do in the novel is to, "Point out that the meaning of the story will emerge through the kind of careful analysis, use of good judgment, and intelligent consideration that Belinda has developed and demonstrates over three volumes and thirty-one chapters" (Weiss 461).

Dror Wahrman summarizes the capacity of eighteenth-century novels to challenge and develop readers, explaining, "The intrinsic potential for mirroring inner subjectivity—and the imperative to do so—were inherent in the novel genre, we have been told, from its eighteenth-century beginnings" (181).[42] His argument focuses on the narratorial activity in novels that opens parallel impressions of characters—their activities and speech contrasted with inner consciousness that the narrator often can access. This doubled access of external and internal content demands reader synthesis. Each reader must assemble a composite understanding of often seriously conflicted character.

In this novel, all of the principle characters and many of the associated cast have secrets. While lady Delacour is the central secret-laden character, even her maid,

[42] Wahrman uses the term "the self" in a specific way. He states, "*The self* stands for a very particular understanding of personal identity, one that presupposes an essential core of selfhood characterized by psychological depth, or interiority, which is the bedrock of unique, expressive individual identity." I agree with Wahrman's definition and describe self and interiority in the same way throughout this chapter. I believe that Castle and Wahrman are agreement on the centrality of the essential self. After all, how could a person choose a mask that was opposite if they did not understand what was essential? The act of Masquerade allows the participant to embrace the experimental idea, "What would it be like if I was the opposite of me?"

Marriott, infers that she carries secrets known only to her. It is the reader's challenge to discover the secrets and the discontinuities between the inner subjective and outer performative traits in nearly every character in the novel. Janet Dunleavy suggests that Edgeworth's niche within the greater category of women's novels is "the novel of doctrine or the novel of social purpose—a step in the history of the genre that was to lead to the political novels" (56). The social purpose that interests Edgeworth in *Belinda* is the identification of interiority as a site of potential conflict within the self and within the society in which the person lives and responds. Terry Castle suggests that masquerade is an ideal trope to locate and discuss subjectivity:

> The pleasures (and dangers) of the masquerade were of a particularly revelatory kind. And indeed, the masquerade broached in a peculiarly stylized way certain issues we have come to locate at the heart of the eighteenth-century culture. The notion of the self—so crucial in the artistic and philosophical idiom of the period, so endlessly problematic—must be invoked in any discussion of the masquerade. (Castle 4)

Limits to Imagination

While Edgeworth explains the rationale that drives her multiple-valenced characters to adopt their complex performatory masks, more significantly, she points to the limits of their imaginations. Adapting a Baconian precept, she demonstrates in the novel that, "Nature is often hidden; sometimes overcome; seldom extinguished" (Durant 88). Characters in the novel who create supplemental surface identities and who attempt an equally contrived passage through life, eventually are confronted with the limitations of their own imaginations. In response to the realization of the insufficiency of their performed lives, they shed their constructed exteriors like a snake's skin and learn to embrace their inner person re-entering life as a genuine rather than a performing

character.[43] Lady Delacour makes this process explicit when she sarcastically evaluates Hervey's performance as a snake. "Why, Clarence, the casting of your serpent's skin seems to have quite changed your nature—nothing but the simplicity of the dove left; and I expect to hear you cooing presently" (28). This more accurate display of the inner self by shedding the outer mask, though presented initially in a material and humorous context, becomes the serious and central business of Edgeworth's novel. Jeremy Hawthorn expands this idea of multiple-self-awareness and restoration:

> Behind Forster's (and Defoe's) approach to the novel lies, one suspects, the essentially pre-modernist view that life in any age is complicated only to the extent that much of it is hidden. Once revealed, this submerged reality and what is made visible will all fit neatly together like a jigsaw; it may be complex, but it will make sense. (47)

Edgeworth's novel explores the difficulties imposed upon a character by their attempt to enact multiple, competing conceptions of the self; she also demonstrates the means to resolution through observation and rationally-based reformation.

The two contrasting fictional characters through whom Edgeworth most closely examines this metamorphosis are Lady Delacour and Virginia St. Pierre (a.k.a. Rachel Hartley). While these two women are in most exterior ways opposites—marital status, class, wealth, education and intelligence—their narratives of synthetic personality development are parallel and provide readers with opportunities to contrast the ways in which the performative external character suppresses the important essential character. Years before the study of psychology is named, Edgeworth examines and pictures the

[43] The first instance of this snake skin shedding activity is humorously demonstrated in Clarence Hervey's literal loss of his snake-skin costume. This scene also upholds his own maxim, that to succeed in masquerade, the disguised must don a costume diametrically opposed to their person. Hervey imagines he will represent the serpent in the Garden who tempted Eve—the epitome of evil seduction. This persona is opposite to the kind of person Hervey proves to be in the unfolding of the novel—thus demonstrating in his own person the universality of the maxim.

complex interaction between personal choice and the recognition of social expectations, as they both compete in the process of self construction. Edgeworth's novel with its complex interaction of many voices and the extended time scale of action examines the depth of human subjectivity and the competing demands for outward performance.

Eventually, lady Delacour and Rachel Hartley shed their outer "skin" and unify their inner and outer selves, thus becoming fulfilled characters. The principle resolution in this novel is not the marriage of all the single heroines—though that does occur. Edgeworth is presenting arguments about education and maturation. The path to a happy-marriage-ending is via recognition and appropriation of the essential subjective self. The restoration of fantasy-seeking women readers follows in part the denouement of Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752). Significantly *different* in *Belinda* is that the restoration is accomplished mostly with other women's assistance and the return to the essential self is portrayed as beneficial not punitive, as some critics have suggested of Arabella's final condition. Edgeworth portrays the initial divided state as the dangerous one; the restored state is the stable and productive one.

Secondly, Edgeworth demonstrates that the performative character blocks beneficial relationships and shared interfaces of life. Lady Delacour and Virginia write fictional accounts of themselves that result in isolation and unhappiness. Lady Delacour writes herself as a dying woman—friendless, disappointed in her marriage and without the possibility of cure. Virginia employs novels and especially Bernadin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul and Virginia* to write herself into a romantic relationship with an unknown hero. Both of these performative exteriors prove to their designers to be unfulfilling. Lady Delacour discovers that she *does not* have breast cancer, she *does* have caring friends and

family and that she *can* improve her outlook and circumstances. Virginia, too, realizes that she wants a real human lover not a literary one; she happily recognizes eventually that her anticipated lover whom she has seen only in a portrait is a *real* human. Her performed, unfulfilled and isolated life is exchanged for one that is romantically and socially fulfilling.

Edgeworth points to the *insufficiency* of fiction-based notions of self. Her text undermines the quixote trope suggesting that, while Don Quixote and his literary descendants may be entertaining, the notion that romance novels can overwrite readers' essential selves is an implausible idea. These are similar to arguments Jane Austen explores in her first novel, *Northanger Abbey* (1818), which she is writing at the same time as Edgeworth.[44] Austen demonstrates in Catherine Morland that a young woman reader is more likely to be *assisted* in her education by novel reading, when she employs her own reason and innate decision-making capabilities. Edgeworth and Austen concur with other late nineteenth-century women writers arguing that a woman's ability to reason is an asset, not only to her own subjective development, but also to her relations with husband, children and acquaintances. These authors use their novels to demonstrate through their protagonists that women grow in sophistication through reading. Deborah Weiss explains, "What Edgeworth offers in *Belinda* is a vision of society in which every woman might increase her own happiness and of her family and friends by applying her understanding to her own experience" (Weiss 461). Belinda is Edgeworth's model reader.

[44] Austen begins work on "Susan" in 1798. This is the same period of time that Edgeworth is working out her ideas about rational education and writing both *Moral Tales* and *Belinda*. In 1803, Austen sells *Susan* to the publisher, Crosby and Company. It is not published, however. In 1816, she buys "Susan" back from the publisher and changes the name to "Catherine." After revisions, it is finally named *Northanger Abbey*, but is not published until after Austen's death in 1817. The book is published in December 1817 but shows an 1818 date of publication.

She is patterned as an objective reader of books and people that Edgeworth hopes to replicate in her readers. Early in the novel, the narrator explains:

> A short time after her arrival at lady Delacour's, Belinda began to see through the thin veil, with which politeness covers domestic misery. Abroad, and at home, lady Delacour was two different persons. Abroad she appeared all life, spirit, and good humour—at home, listless, fretful and melancholy; she seemed like a spoiled actress off the stage, over stimulated by applause, and exhausted by the exertions of supporting a fictitious character. (10)

The deeply perceptive Belinda is able to identify duplicity in lady Delacour's character and behavior. This is work she does unaided—before lady Delacour opens the windows on her inner self and history. After lady Delacour's full revelation, Belinda realizes, "At a distance, lady Delacour had appeared…the happiest person in the world; upon a nearer view, she discovered that her ladyship was one of the most miserable of human beings" (69). Being able to investigate the interiority of performing characters requires a reduction in relative distance to the character being examined. Edgeworth points to the ability in characters to obscure the essential self that is facilitated by distance in relationships. In this instance alone, the narrator eliminates for the readers the distance between Belinda and lady Delacour precipitates an enhanced understanding for Belinda and her readers. In this one relationship, the collapsing distance is meritorious and beneficial for both. In nearly every other interaction among characters, the necessarily maintained secrets bolster the need for distance and masquerade. About Clarence Hervey for instance, there are frequent hints about his relationship to a secret lover. In Hervey's case, however, there are no close relations. Everyone—including readers—must form their own theories about the mysteries surrounding the male protagonist.

One Character to Resolve Them All

Of the several characters that compose the core menagerie of personalities in the novel, Belinda is the least duplicitous and perhaps the least interesting! From any perspective Belinda is a flat character—emotionally, psychologically and socially. She occupies the place of interpreter of others' interiors, while hers is inaccessible to readers. The author reveals little of Belinda's interior and back-story. She offers no explanation of why Belinda is capable decrypting others' complexity. Readers know little more about Belinda at the end of the novel than they have been told in the first few pages. She is a presence—a person who is functional in the novel—in an almost an oracle-like role. She is the voice of reason and the pivotal character upon which this moral tale depends. Dunleavy suggests:

> Belinda's character, in private as in public, is stable and predictable. Shyness, modesty, prudence, and good manners all contribute to her public reserve. The public persona created by that reserve, like her aunt's green baize carpet covering, is interpreted by those around her as evidence that something deeper and wiser lies beneath…beneath Belinda's reserve there is nothing more extraordinary than a simple, trusting, and affectionate nature, true virtue, and old-fashioned values. (57)

Other characters in the novel and first-time readers of the novel *imagine* Belinda's prosaic exterior is evidence of a secret interior. Why not? All of the other characters have hidden interiors. Why shouldn't Belinda? But, this is Edgeworth's point about her heroine; Belinda's goodness and utility to others emerge from a single, consistent inner self, one governed generally by rationality. Belinda is positioned on behalf of Edgeworth's readers to point to the lessons they are to emulate and the value of the moral point of view. For Belinda, each conflicted character she encounters, each eruption of difficult circumstances she experiences, increases her insight and builds conviction about

her own rectitude. After observing both Hervey's duplicity and lady Delacour's deceptions, the narrator leaves no doubt about Belinda's confident logic and decisions:

> This last idea struck her, it excited, in the most edifying manner, her indignation against coquetry in general, and against her ladyship's in particular; she became wonderfully clear sighted to all the improprieties of her ladyship's conduct. Belinda's newly acquired moral sense was so much shocked, that she actually wrote a full statement of her observations, and her scruples. (15)

Belinda's regular response to experience is self-affirmation of the position in which the narrator has already positioned her. She demonstrates an innate code of morality by which she evaluates others' behavior. Belinda grows stronger in her self-confidence—even after observing and synthesizing from bad examples:

> Good may be drawn from evil. Mrs. Freke's conversation, though at the time it confounded Belinda, roused her, upon reflection, to examine by her reason the habits and principles which guided her conduct. She had a general feeling that they were right and necessary; but now, with the assistance of Lady Anne and Mr. Percival, she established in her own understanding the exact boundaries between right and wrong… Reasoning gradually became as agreeable to her as wit; nor was her taste for wit diminished, it was only refined by the process. (*Belinda* 232)

I contend that Belinda at best is "refined" over the course of the novel, but she is essentially unchanged. Edgeworth does not interrogate Belinda's interiority or psychological construction. However, she is not constructed to be *interesting*; she is constructed to be *right*. This is a moral tale—at least that is Edgeworth's declaration. Once Belinda is established as the *gnomon*, the reader relies on her judgments. This arrangement works against developing sophisticated readers. Fortunately, the mysteries surrounding Clarence Hervey and Virginia St. Pierre are impenetrable for Belinda, and readers must synthesize the clues to complete the investigative work. Consequently, *Belinda* works as both a romantic novel and a conservative, didactic moral tale.

Belinda's Mind

Belinda's precocious analytical capability establishes her as the rational reader of people.[45] What is problematic with Edgeworth's portrayal of her heroine is that readers are given no information about Belinda's past or her interior self. If there is an exemplary formula for developing morally stable, intellectually sufficient characters, Edgeworth does not reveal it in Belinda. If the central trope of *Belinda* is masquerade and conflict with the essential self, Belinda exists in a plane separate from the other characters. She alone is unbending, unchanging and potentially *unbelievable* as a real human. While she enjoys reading, her person is never superseded by imaginary characters from the books she read. The narrator is careful to call attention to her relationship—really a non-relationship—to books:

> Her taste for literature declined in proportion to her intercourse with the fashionable world, as she did not in this society, perceive the least use in the knowledge that she had acquired. Her mind had never been roused to much reflection…she was more undesigning, and more free from affectation and coquetry, than could have been expected, after the course of documenting, which she had gone through. (*Belinda* 10)

This is one of the most important features of Belinda's composition—she is able to swim in the pool of ideas, without being affected by them. She is not substantially changed by her reading experience as contemporary critics feared. In a conversation with Harriet Freke midway through the novel, Belinda reveals that reading books contributes to her reasoning, but the book's influence is always ruled by her own reason. Harriet's argument with Belinda about reading and readers exemplifies Belinda's assertion:

> "Books only spoil the originality of genius. Very well for those who can't think for themselves—but when one has made up one's opinions, there is

[45] Later in the novel, Dr. X will join Belinda as the one rational male reader of books and people. He is an author and a balanced reader of literature. He employs it with wit and in appropriate circumstances.

> no use reading."
> "But to make them up," replied Belinda, "May it not be useful?"
> "Of no use upon earth to minds of a certain class. You, who can think for yourself, should never read."
> "But I read that I may think for myself." (*Belinda* 227)

This is an important feature of Belinda's perfectly structured self. Books have the same effects on her as experiences—they both *assist* her thinking; they facilitate intellectual growth but never erase or dominate her reasoning. This is a major premise that Edgeworth makes about the benefit of reading. In addition to her exceptional reading skills, Belinda displays many other exemplary qualities—integrity, loyalty, courage and compassion. By the author's careful construction, Belinda emerges as an exemplar of an educated woman. Above all other traits and capacities, when contrasted with co-actors in the novel, she is not masked; she is consistent and readable.

Mask On

Only once does she intentionally wear a mask—that of the tragic Muse. In this instance, Belinda is not a willing participant. Lady Delacour forces her to exchange costumes clandestinely, resulting in Hervey erroneously censuring Belinda to her face (behind the mask), thinking that it is lady Delacour. The reader immediately sees the several layers of irony in this forced masquerade. First, Belinda wears the *tragic Muse* mask, a character diametrically opposite to herself. This is the arrangement that Hervey formulates and lady Delacour cites. However, in this case, Hervey's maxim is incorrect. His criticism, "That Belinda Portman's a composition of art and affectation" (26), is another layer of false character imposed on her—first the doubly false costume that is not hers and is not a reflection or a refraction of her character, then the imputation of false character as "an undesigning, unaffected girl" (15). Castle commenting on the effect of

masquerade as it is applies in literature emphasizes, "Because of the masquerade's classic association with mystification and intrigue, masquerade scenes in fiction, as in the drama, provided diverting opportunities for plot development" (114). This is the effect that masquerade, and particularly this conversation between Belinda and Clarence, has on the direction of this novel. The mistake prompts Belinda's response to Clarence and to the people in society who are attempting to mask her in artfulness. Belinda confirms her opinion that masquerade is a dangerous sport. She will not be imposed upon again in a way that could cause an observer to see anything but the real Belinda. More significantly, the masquerade works to position the male and female protagonists as pugilists throughout the lengthy novel, a familiar trope which Austen will employ in *Pride and Prejudice* in a similar construction.

Mask Off

In the equally ironic unmasking of Belinda, lady Delacour tells Belinda, "Your mask must come off" (27). She means the girl needs to be given fresh air. "When lady Delacour pulled off Belinda's mask, her face was, during the first instant, pale; the next moment, crimsoned over with a burning blush" (Ibid.). At that moment, Hervey realizes his blunder; Belinda expresses embarrassment and anger over his false representation of her. Belinda assesses the dangers of masquerade and resolves to prevent reoccurrence:

> Never, never more will I take such advice—never more will I expose myself to be insulted as a female adventurer. Little did I know in what a light I appeared. Little did I know what *gentlemen* thought of my aunt Stanhope—of my cousins—of myself. (28)

In the person of Belinda, Edgeworth points to the sufficiency and desirability of a life not surrendered to an imaginary other. The narrator comments about Belinda's clarifying of

purpose at this critical juncture in her socialization:

> It is singular that the very means, which Mrs. Stanhope had taken to make a fine lady of her niece, tended to produce an effect diametrically opposite to [that] expected. The result of Belinda's reflections upon lady Delacour's history was resolution to profit by her bad example. (70)

Here we see Hervey's maxim repeated by Mrs. Stanhope, but challenged by the narrator. Hervey says that "People always succeed best, when they assume a character diametrically opposed to their own" (19). He is describing how to choose costumes for a masquerade; but his maxim is extended by the narrator into each of the real masks that characters choose. Mrs. Stanhope agrees with Hervey's philosophy and wants to make Belinda into a "fine lady," a process that would demand her to learn "art and affectation." She believes that Belinda must employ a mask of gentility and affectation to succeed in society and especially in the marriage market. This kind of performative exterior, which Hervey believes is the real Belinda, is the one that Belinda rejects. Lady Delacour observes Belinda's response to the botched masquerade and imagines her resolutions. She puts words into Belinda's mouth explaining, this is what you are doing thinking and planning and what you hope to achieve:

> You see, sir, a word to the wise is enough—I understand you disapprove of showy dress, and coquetry, and therefore, as I dressed and coquetted only to please you, now I shall lay aside dress and coquetry, since I find that they are not to your taste—and hope, sir, you like my simplicity! (71)

This is a complex discourse. It is purportedly the words that Belinda might say to Clarence Hervey, but will not. So, lady Delacour speaks them aloud to Belinda in order to critique them. She instructs Belinda, "So don't, novice as you are! Set about to manoeuvre for yourself. Leave all that to your aunt Stanhope, or to me" (Ibid.). Of course these are *not hypothetical* actions for Belinda. They are exactly what she intends to

implement; more importantly, she has determined that in the future, she will ignore the counsel and craft of her aunt and lady Delacour.

This is Edgeworth's initial positioning of Belinda as a purveyor of sound judgment. In the novel, Belinda never wears another mask, material or psychological. She refuses to deceive for her own or others' advantage. About this determination, the narrator carefully explains what is happening in Belinda—the resolutions develop, because she is observing and judging:

> When the understanding is suddenly roused and forced to exert itself, what a multitude of deductions it makes in a short time. Belinda saw things in a new light; and for the first time in her life she reasoned for herself upon what she saw and felt. It is sometimes safer for young people to see, than to hear of certain characters. (69)

This statement, *reasoning for herself*, is a critically important argument that Edgeworth locates in Belinda. Belinda has been educated in part by reading literature, but reading alone is insufficient to develop moral decision making. The observed good and bad behaviors prompt Belinda to reason. The experiences augment but do not substantially alter her outlook. Belinda's rationality and her thorough commitment to propriety make her the stable standard of good behavior, against which the various multilayered and inconsistent characters are measured.

Quixotic Readers

Positioning Belinda as reliable judge creates significant irony in this as well as other didactic novels. As long as Belinda functions as the infallible exemplary model, readers of the novel need not develop their own intelligent inquiry. Sarah Raff argues, "The conduct discourse of the eighteenth-century novel demanded and attempted to create quixotic readers…the very staple of the didactic mode, itself seduced and

encouraged quixotism in the reader" (468). If *Belinda* is characterized as a novel, it fails to work like one by encouraging discriminating reading. When Edgeworth positions Belinda as the perfect adjudicator of character, she eliminates the work that novels require of readers. If *Belinda* is a moral tale, as Edgeworth declares it to be, then Belinda functions appropriately as mentor and preceptor. Edgeworth published her *Moral Tales* in the same year as *Belinda*. In her preface to *Belinda*, Edgeworth states, "The following work is offered to the public as a Moral Tale—the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel" (3). She further explains that novels are full of "folly, errour, and vice"; therefore, her story is not a novel. By positioning the moral stationary point in the person of a seventeen-year-old girl, she advances the concept of rational education and the status and capability of women in an exemplary way. Edgeworth creates Belinda's character as a better type than Rousseau's Sophia. However, in creating a perfectly exemplary character, Edgeworth enacts her own version of quixotism on her readers. Raff argues:

> Orthodox fiction advertises the notion that its own ethical standards are shared by educated, right-thinking adults everywhere. It presents a set of "general" or widely held opinions meant to guide the reader's expectations of life in a reliable way…If the essence of quixotic delusion is the belief that fictional events offer an accurate reflection of real ones…then the orthodox tenet that certain fictional characters are good models for lived behavior calls for quixotism and is itself quixotic. (475)

In the conservative (didactic) eighteenth-century texts, the attempt to preclude the one kind of quixotism—patterning life choices after a delusional reader—creates another kind of quixotism—*carte blanche* appropriation of the exemplary fictional character. Sophisticated readers of this moral tale understand that that Belinda's relative psychological and behavioral perfection positions her as a lens through which they can analyze other characters and compare them to Edgeworth's ideal woman. In constructing

Belinda in this way Edgeworth masquerades an ordinary young woman in the cloak of a perfect, mature and socially well-adjusted woman.

Lady Delacour's Breast

If Belinda is the personification of a consistent and uncomplicated character, lady Delacour is the polar opposite. In public, she appears as a self-assured socialite. She is fashionable, witty and socially well-connected. However, in private, she reveals another facet to her confidants—Marriott, her woman servant, and Belinda, her protégé. To those two only she unmasks, revealing the emotional and physical conditions that she hides from family and friends. The character of lady Delacour is complex; she is always involved in a masquerade before varying audiences. Dunleavy suggests:

> Her rapidly changing moods and emotional highs and lows (evidence of an internal ambivalence that she can neither control nor ignore) create a public impression of a vacillating nature…lady Delacour is frequently misled by her own conceit, bias, and self-interest…she continues to misread people, misinterpret situations, and mishandle her life. (57)

This fact makes her choices of a costume for the masquerade impossible. How can anyone choose a costume diametrically opposed to oneself, as Hervey suggests, when there are *already* multiple versions of that self? Marriott suggests lady Delacour should be the tragic muse. Marriott, more than any other person, knows that much of lady Delacour's life is tragic; hence, a tragic mask would evidence the true interior. That choice would work opposite to Hervey's maxim. However, the opposite selection of costume would be equally ironic. To don the comic muse would be the wrong choice, according to Hervey, because the apparent personality of lady Delacour is a happy one. Since lady Delacour already has a happy external and an unhappy internal persona, her choice of *either* mask supports and refutes Hervey's maxim simultaneously. Perhaps a

better mask for lady Delacour would be that of *Janus*, the goddess with two faces, one looking forward and the other behind.

To further complicate the masked-persona riddle, lady Delacour exchanges costumes in private, after she has created the impression in others that she will be dressed as the comic muse. Lady Delacour creates multiple levels of deception. She is practiced at masking and changing identities on demand—because she has much about herself that she wishes to remain hidden. Dunleavy explains the complexity of lady Delacour's condition:

> Once she may have been a Belinda, but her moral armor was insufficient to the tests she had to undergo. The woman she now is in the world of the novel is duplicitous. She is dependent on a range of situational masks, private and public, to hide unwelcome truths from herself as well as from others, to deny to others what she cannot hide even from herself …for her, openness and honesty require effort; self-serving, dissembling, and deceit are almost second nature. Yet, there is enough left of the woman she once was to cause her discomfort at times, if not pain, with consequential adverse effects on her self-confidence. (57)

Her inconsistencies are evidenced in many of the facets of her life. She constructs her outer self, when she enters the public arena. Then she sheds that construction, when she retreats into her private boudoir. She appears to be comfortably wealthy, yet has experienced periods of indebtedness—she continues to spend extravagantly to demonstrate that she possesses wealth. She appears to have no children, yet has borne three babies—two died and one is estranged. She appears to be vibrant and confident; yet she knows that she has been the source of her children's misery and is now suffering from a malignant disease of her own creation. She appears to have many friends, but the ones we meet in the novel are not friendly toward her. She appears to be a paragon of social awareness. She is selected by Mrs. Stanhope for her expertise at introducing

eligible young women into society. Yet, Belinda and the reader realize that her status as a respected socialite is questionable. She lives frequently in her created performative character, but her essential self wants to experience respect and love. The pursuit of praise sustains the exterior mask, but the inner person wants substantial relationships.

The Body as a Site of Inner Malady

All of these inconsistencies and constructions are represented materially in lady Delacour's malignant breast. Wounded in a duel by the recoil of her own pistol, the breast becomes bruised, painful and in her own mind—malignant. The wounded breast represents other aspects of lady Delacour's wounding. While the fact of her wound is carefully hidden, it also affects most of her relationships and her own expectations about the future. Edgeworth locates lady Delacour's decline and restoration in her breast. If the breast can be cured, then lady Delacour's other less threatening issues might also be resolved. The narrator puts this formula into lady Delacour's mouth. She tells Belinda:

> I am resolved to make one desperate effort for my life. New plans, new hopes of happiness, have opened to my imagination, and, with my hopes of being happy, my courage rises. I am determined to submit to the dreadful operation which alone can radically cure me. (175)

Her new hopes of happiness are created in her newly restored relationship with her daughter, Helena. Until recently, Helena was estranged from her mother. Her absence was a source of pain for lady Delacour, and a reminder of her inadequacy as a mother. The narrator materializes this pain moving it from the psychological to the physical. In an instantaneous response to her mother's kindness:

> The little girl sprang forwards, and threw her arms around her mother, exclaiming, "Oh, mamma! Are you in earnest? And she pressed close to her other's bosom, clasping her with all her force. Lady Delacour screamed, and pushed her daughter away. (173)

These responses of daughter and mother typify lady Delacour's other relationships. What might bring her joy in proximity to others, brings instead pain—in response to which she pushes others away. Belinda calms the daughter, assuring her, "She is not angry with you, my love!" (Ibid.) In this instance, the distancing of daughter from mother has a rational, material explanation; lady Delacour's breast is diseased, inflamed and that makes it impossible for someone to embrace her affectionately. However, the issues of her breast represent—without much imagination on the part of the reader—the greater issues of lady Delacour's strained and strange relationships. She knows that if she is ever to hold her daughter closely—in both the physical and emotional dimensions—she will need to undergo the "Dreadful operation which alone can radically cure [her]." However, she links to this physical operation a change in her that will allow her to attempt new plans and a possible reformation. This potential reformation is made possible by observing her daughter's unconditional love and Belinda's unwavering friendship. What lady Delacour imagines is a radical change in her behavior, as radical as the surgery she contemplates. That she needs to remove the infected breast seems evident; that she needs to remove the malignant attitudes and bias is less evident to her. However, she links the one restorative process to the other.

This is one of the several moments in Edgeworth's novel (a.k.a. moral tale) in which the didactic move is barely masked by the narrative. Lady Delacour's injuries—to her breast and to her emotional well-being—are largely the result of her own foolish behavior. The socialite exterior mask and accompanying performance in public have caused damage to her inner person. A removal of the exterior causes will likely restore the inner stability necessary to form more beneficial relationships with her husband,

daughter and new friends, worthy of that title.

Hide or Seek?

Through the first half of the novel, lady Delacour's response to the issues that trouble her is hiding. She suppresses the difficulties of her past and present alliances, as well as hiding the damage to her breast. She attempts to relieve the stresses of hiding by showing Belinda her damaged breast. The narrator prefaces her lady Delacour's revelations with this description; "She then…wiped the paint from her face, and returning to Belinda, held the candle so as to throw the light full upon her livid features. Her eyes were sunk, her cheeks hollow—no trace of youth or beauty remained" (31). Here, the physical activity prepares the scene for the conversation that will follow. Lady Delacour reveals to Belinda that what she looks like without her mask varies greatly from her carefully prepared public face. Lady Delacour then explains that the external is merely symptomatic of the interior.

> Yes, pity me, for what you have seen; and a thousand times more, for that which you cannot see—my mind is eaten away like my body, my incurable disease—inveterate remorse—remorse for a life of folly—of folly, which has brought on me all the punishments of guilt (32).

In chronological sequence, lady Delacour relates the various mistakes she had made and the influencers and activities that led her into frolic then folly. She says, with regret, "Habit, fashion, the devil, I believe, leads us on," and summarizes, "My object…is to conceal from the world, what I cannot conceal from myself, that I am a dying women…I was intended for something better-but now it is too late" (64). Finally, she explains that the remorse she carries is primarily fueled by her complicit involvement in the death of Colonel Lawless. She states, "Conscience! Conscience will be heard" (65). What is

significant about her tragic monologue is that she realizes the insufficiency of her posing. The external mask of frolic and happiness is penetrated by the reality of the greater issues within. Her imaginary and constructed self is insufficient to overwrite her actual inner self. The narrator explains that lady Delacour's "Pride…was always stronger than [her] reason" (52) and, reflecting on her early training notes, "Her understanding, weakened perhaps by disease, and never accustomed to reason, was incapable of distinguishing between truth and errour" (270). This is one of the several instances in which Edgeworth addresses the false notion that the imagined self can permanently erase of completely override the interior persona. In the person of lady Delacour, she demonstrates to her readers that even a dissipated person can be restored by appropriately applied surgeries—physical, mental and emotional.

Lady Delacour links the reformation of her own person with the hope of a successful surgical repair of her cancerous breast. Earlier in the novel, she regrets that she had not taken the opportunity to be herself.[46] On several occasions immediately prior to her surgery, she makes public statements of her intent to reform. "I am resolved…to make one desperate effort for my life…I am determined to submit to the dreadful operation which alone can radically cure me" (177). In a lengthier pronouncement, she links her breast repair to a more comprehensive reform—not becoming a new person—rather, assuming and exerting her real, inner person, which has been temporarily suppressed. She suggests:

> "If I survive *this business*," said she, "it is my firm intention to appear in a new character, or rather to assert my real character. I will break through the spell of dissipation – I will at once cast off all the acquaintance that are

[46] For instance, "O that I had, at this instant, dared to be myself! But my fear of ridicule was greater than my fear of vice" (48).

> unworthy of me—I will, in one word, go with you, my dear Belinda! I am willing that the recovery of my moral health should be attributed to the salubrious air of Oakley Park." (292)

This is an important moment in the novel, when lady Delacour realizes fully what Belinda has seen—that there is an interior person waiting to be liberated from its suppressed condition. Appropriate surgeries will begin to remove the outer diseased layers, allowing for restoration of the real interior self. It is now time for Belinda to assist lady Delacour with an unmasking that duplicates, though in much greater significance, that which lady Delacour had performed on Belinda after the masquerade ball.

From these summary critiques of lady Delacour's weaknesses and from the history that she reveals to Belinda and the additional adventures related to the reader, it is evident that breast surgery will only correct a portion of lady Delacour's diseases. The often referenced diseased breast functions as a representation of the more extensive malignancy on the inside. In fact there are at least five malignant areas of her internal persona. These are listed separately for clarity but are intertwined in cause and cure. They include:

- Her betrayal by the deceptive and dangerous Harriet Freke
- The breast and what it represents in failed womanhood/motherhood
- Her enduring remorse for her part in the death of Colonel Lawless
- Her fractured relationship with husband and daughter
- The "methodistical" literature she reads for comfort and counsel

Even if the breast surgery is successful, the other issues will continue to poison her spirit and her long-term family and social relations, unless they are also treated effectively.

One Denouement

In the last two chapters of Part II, the narrator describes lady Delacour's healing. In rapid sequence, the five physical, social and psychological malignancies are treated and cured. The breast turns out to be nonmalignant, a diagnosis made possible by

Belinda's actions to employ Dr. X and a certified surgeon. The breast might have been cured naturally had lady Delacour not resorted to using a pharmaceutical quack, who knowingly treated her pain with laudanum and continued to damage the breast with other drugs for his own emolument. It is ironic that the masked lady Delacour is made worse in her physical malady by one of the many other masked characters—a charlatan pharmacist. She is freed of the fear of death from cancer by a nonmasked, reliable surgeon and counselor.

The reconciliation of husband and daughter is carefully managed by Belinda and Clarence. The horrific nature of the planned surgery also contribute to the increased empathy and support of husband and daughter. They are also encouraged in their resolution of past conflicts by the example and instruction that Belinda has provided.

Eliminating the freaky Harriet Freke is as important as curing the breast, which was, of course, damaged because of Harriet's counsel. And who is the instrument that discovers the identity of the spectre?—Belinda of course. She believes there must be some element of truth in lady Delacour's sighting of a ghostly intruder in the garden. Consequently, Belinda employing her powers of observation and vigilance, positions herself at the window and observes the stranger in the garden. With the assistance of Dr. X and the gardener, they capture the miscreant spectre—who turns out to be Mrs. Freke in another of her several male disguises. The capture and unmasking of Harriet Freke proves to be her last appearance on the stage. The narrator concludes her history and presence, saying, "Mrs. Freke was by her own desire conveyed to her cousin's house, where without regret we shall leave her to suffer the consequences of her frolic" (312).

By her own direct and indirect efforts, Belinda instrumentally precipitates three of the five required repairs—actions that will restore the primacy of lady Delacour's internal persona. Marriott supplies the summary of Belinda's rational philanthropy, reminding the small assemblage, "And we may thank miss [sic] Portman for this, for t'was she made every thing [sic] go right, and I never expected to live to see so happy a day" (314). Lady Delacour declares, "My actions, the whole course of my future life, shall show that I am not quite a brute. " To which lord Delacour retorts, "Even brutes are won by kindness." Observe, my lord, continued she, smiling, "I said *won* not *tamed*! A tame lady Delacour would be a sorry animal not worth looking at" (314). This is an important posturing of lady Delacour by the author as a reformed, not broken, woman. Edgeworth suggests that the recuperation of lady Delacour is not only a benefit to herself but that she will have equally beneficial influence on others. She retains aspects of her personality that made her distinct and interesting—but she is not tamed. Rather, she is liberated from her own masquerade and has increased in her rational capacities to liberate others.

Dr. X succeeds in treating the final two malignancies (guilt about the death of Colonel Lawless and her reading in Methodist literature) by employing a reliable chaplain who is able to minister to mental disease and guide lady Delacour into better religious practices. The narrator concludes:

> She was no longer in continual anxiety to conceal the state of her health from the world. She had no secret to keep – no part to act; her reconciliation with her husband and with his friends restored her mind to ease and self-complacency. Her little Helena was a source of daily pleasure; and no longer conscious of neglecting her daughter; she no longer feared the affections of her child should be alienated. (316)

These are appropriate ending lines for a novel that focuses primarily on the recuperation of lady Delacour. However, Belinda is unmarried! That would be an unacceptable

condition for readers of romance novels. Therefore, Volume III celebrates lady Delacour's speedy recovery and her dedication to the task of engaging her choice of husband for Belinda. In order to do this, she must employ the rational skills she observed in Belinda to extract Clarence Hervey from a trap of his own creation, not unlike the self-created traps from which lady Delacour was released. In the last volume, Edgeworth shows how the recuperated lady Delacour becomes a rational woman, able to negotiate not only her own circumstances, but also those of others. Edgeworth demonstrates in this sequence the potential of one educated woman to impact the education of another. We see a chain of rational behavior extend from Belinda to lady Delacour and then to Virginia—with the logical inference that a continuing chain, such as this one, could have a wider impact on the education of other women.

Virginia's Books

When lady Delacour begins to tell her story to Belinda, she prefaces her narrative with this caveat:

> My dear, you will be woefully disappointed, if in my story you expect anything like a novel. I once heard a general say that nothing was less like a review than a battle; and I can tell you that nothing is more unlike a novel than real life. Of all lives, mine has been the least romantic. (36)

This disclaimer is hugely ironic in that lady Delacour only exists as a character in a novel. Additionally, her story sounds more like a novel than a story about a prosaic domesticated woman. It is hard to imagine a more *un-normal* life than lady Delacour's—loss of fortune, dueling women, surprise accession to a new fortune, hidden injuries and murdered lovers. She might easily have reversed the comparison and stated there is nothing more like real life than a novel. Lady Delacour's life story is among the most

complex and serendipitous, exceeding by far the expectations of an ordinary life. The complexity of her narrative is only exceeded by that of Virginia St. Pierre (a.k.a. Rachel Hartley) as told by Clarence Hervey in Volume III of *Belinda*. While lady Delacour's tale could easily be described as a novel, Virginia's can be described as a romance, a parody of a romance and a refutation of a romance.

Throughout *Belinda's* narrative, most of the primary characters interact with and are influenced by books of different genre, and are effected by their reading in limited ways. Virginia, however, is nearly completely shaped by her reading of novels, to the extent that she assumes both the name of a fictional character and that character's author's name.[47] Her own life story is as complex as any romantic heroine. She is abandoned by her father, orphaned by her mother, raised by an imposing grandmother. She falls in love with a small picture of a man that she has never met. She lives hidden away, first in an idyllic cabin in the forest, later in a secluded and walled cottage. She is allowed no visitors and educated entirely in seclusion. Her life and education are controlled completely by Clarence Hervey, who intends to attempt to raise and train a wife for himself, applying Rousseau's model of education he had imagined for Sophie. At every level, she is a combination of romantic tropes and a product of others' and her own attempts to fashion a person after a fictional character. Adding to the irony of her existence within this novel—she cannot write. If she wanted to write her own narrative, her own opinion of herself and her desires, she cannot. She can absorb others' stories but cannot create or record her own. Virginia's naming, circumstances and life coincidences

[47] It is Clarence Hervey who initially assigns the new names to Rachel, because of his own reading of *Paul and Virginia*. Her isolated conditions and naivety remind him of the eponymous tragic character in Bernadin St. Pierre's novel. Rachel, however, evidences no resistance to the name change, and thinks of herself as a romantic heroine, at least in the early years of her secluded education.

are so fantastic that she becomes an unbelievable character, one who resembles a character in a romance. Some critics view the Virginia piece of *Belinda* as a poorly-connected second narrative. Jeanne Britton contends:

> The subplot of Virginia St. Pierre informs *Belinda's* main plot in ways that criticism has not sufficiently addressed. Virginia's forced identification with the fictional heroine is followed by her enraptured reading of Bernadine's novel which prompts imaginative processes that parallel scenes of character performance and revelation in the novel's central plot. (Britton 438)

I argue that this narrative is enacting the same work that the lady-Delacour-narrative accomplishes. It demonstrates that, even under the worst possible reading conditions, fictional narratives do not satisfactorily overwrite a reader; and that attempts to closely identify with a fictional character are largely self-correcting; imagining a self by re-enacting an fictional story disrupts normal relations to an extent that the imaginary self is eventually diminished, allowing the essential self to regain the dominant position. This is a phenomenon I will discuss further in my Chapter 5 analysis of Sarah Green's *Scotch Novel Reading*. What Edgeworth demonstrates as a rational, educational process in lady Delacour's restoration, she echoes in Virginia's more complex circumstances. As such, Virginia's denouement—including receipt of her lost father, materialization of an imagined suitor and rejection of her guardian as a lover—contributes significantly to demonstrating Edgeworth's ideas about reading and education. At the same time, Edgeworth is challenging Rousseau's educational theory of isolation and self-motivated teaching for young women. Contrasting Belinda with Virginia, she demonstrates that reading must be augmented with learning from experience, the two inputs being synthesized through rational thinking. After demonstrating the value of Belinda's approach to reading and learning through experience, Edgeworth shows the dangers of

isolated reading, without the experience.

Sophisticated Reader Transmission

It is important to recognize the narrative sequencing and connection between lady Delacour's recuperation as it impacts Virginia's recuperation. It is because lady Delacour has been altered significantly by Belinda's example that lady Delacour is available and willing to deploy her newly-activated rational and compassionate capacities to recuperate Virginia and release Clarence Hervey from the self-imposed engagement to his experimental woman/bride.

While Virginia is influenced in her imagination by the books that she reads, her sense of self is not displaced by what she reads. Edgeworth makes her isolated, motherless character much different than Lennox's Arabella, concerning their responses to fictional characters. Arabella retains her name but pretends she is a romantic heroine. Virginia assumes a new name, derived from fiction, but understands who she is and does not imagine herself to be the Virginia in the novel. Others are much more confused in this matter. Clarence names her Virginia, because she reminds him of her fictional namesake. He views her as being an isolated, innocent and malleable character. He eventually has her portrait painted in a setting based on the novel's uninhabited locale. In spite of these fictional overlays imposed on her, Virginia does not adopt any of them. Catherine Toal explains this refusal as normal and explains that it is to be expected. She argues:

> Tutorly domination of the child's surrounding world will always prove unworkable and unnecessary because the subtle operation of childhood impressions both evades manipulation and contributes usefully to development… I would propose, however, that the subplot miniaturizes the novel's strikingly idealized, "utopian" version of practical education's premises, figuring early imprints on the imagination as innately

> wholesome, and implying that individual formation will self-sufficiently, organically progress toward "normal" outcomes. (221)

Virginia appears to resist adoption of fictional plots. She adapts some of the ideas but is not overwritten by them. This portrayal, while a relatively minor part of the overall narrative, is important in the polemic which Edgeworth weaves into *Belinda*. Virginia, like Belinda and lady Delacour, demonstrates her capacity to reason and her autonomy of imagination. During Mrs. Ormond's probing conversation, intended to uncover Virginia's heart attachments, Virginia refutes attempts by Mrs. Ormond to write her narrative:

> "I know all you think, and all you feel: I know," whispered Mrs. Ormond, "the name that is on your lips."
> "No indeed, you do not: you cannot," cried Virginia, suddenly raising her head, and looking up in Mrs. Ormond's face, with surprise and timidity, "how could you possibly know all my thoughts and feelings? I never told them to you; for, indeed, I have only confused ideas, floating in my imagination, from the books I have been reading. I do not distinctly know my own feelings…but of this I am certain, that I had not the name, which you were thinking of, upon my lips." (381)

This is among the most wonderfully complex ironic narratives in this novel. Everyone thinks they know what is happening in Virginia's mind—Mrs. Ormond, Clarence Hervey and especially readers—and *no one* is right! Mrs. Ormond thinks the name on her lips is either *Paul* or his *avatar,* Clarence. These are the only two men's names that Virginia knows, since she has been kept in isolation. However, as it is later revealed, she has *no name* on her lips, because she has only seen the man she loves in a picture and in her dreams. What irritates Virginia is that Mrs. Ormond is writing her (Virginia's) romantic story for her. Virginia does not want to enact the role of the fictional Virginia (who in the novel dies before she can marry!); she wants to have her own romance with a real man. Hervey believes *he* is that real man; and in that surmise, he is also wrong. In the continuing conversation, Virginia says, "In the daytime I often think of those heroes,

those charming heroes that I read of in the books you have given me… I love some of them better than I do him." Mrs. Ormond counters, "Mr. Hervey cannot be jealous of those charming heroes that never existed, though they are not quite like him" (383). This dialog between ward and guardian points to Virginia's sound reasoning about her indebtedness to Hervey, while not overlaying the character of a fictional lover on him in her mind. It is Mrs. Ormond who is reading the novels and their supposed effect on the female mind incorrectly.

In some ways, Virginia is a replica of Belinda, the primary difference being her lack of experience and her inability to learn from books in a social environment in which reading experiences can be shared. Bray makes these comparisons between Belinda's and Virginia's educational environment:

> Virginia's education has *not* taken place in the company of others, in a social setting. In her pedagogical, as well as her fictional, works, Edgeworth repeatedly rejects Harriet Freke's opposition of 'books' and 'conversation.' She insists on the contrary that it is by mixing in society, and in like-minded communities, that the young, female reader is able to develop her reading skills, and use her reading actively as a means to understand herself and the world. (117)

Edgeworth shifts the blame for the botched manufacture of Hervey's experimental bride on exactly the conditions that Rousseau recommends—isolation. Edgeworth contends that isolation leads to ignorance; isolated reading leads to poor understanding of how a text might be used in the educational process. In Edgeworth's chapter "*Books*" in *Essays on Practical Education*, she argues, "The difference between reality and fiction is so great, that those who copy from any thing[sic] but nature are continually disposed to make mistakes in their conduct, which appear ludicrous to the impartial spectator" (427). Virginia has been exposed *only* to fiction and always in isolated conditions. In telling

Rachel's past to Mrs. Ormond, Mrs. Smith explains that Rachel's grandmother never let her talk to any man. Mrs. Smith states, "But there, I thought, she was quite wrong; for seeing the girl must, sometime or other, speak to men, where was the use of her not learning to do it properly" (368)? This is the point that Edgeworth makes about Rachel's education and by extension that of other adolescents. To attempt to isolate a young woman in order to avoid the familiar and social communications creates greater problems than the ones it tries to avoid; it ignores the necessary social dynamic that is essential to developing reasoning skills and providing balance to youthful imagination.

It is not surprising that Virginia loves to think fondly about the novels she reads; they are the only company she has. What is more significant as Edgeworth has modeled it is the fact that her reading in isolation has not captured her or over-written her sense of self-awareness; the romances she reads have *not* created a female quixote. She continues to know who she is. She imagines a real parent coming to claim her and a real lover coming to be her partner, but she is completely aware that these are real wishes for real circumstances, stimulated perhaps by her reading of fiction, but not identical in their prescription. She wants to be *Rachel* not Virginia. Her reading has augmented her education, but not subverted it. Her resistance to externally imposed expectation from books and people reminds the reader of Belinda's. Provided with a more robust social environment and the ability to interact with others about what she reads, she is much more likely to become a Belinda rather than a female quixote.

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CHAPTER 4

NORTHANGER ABBEY – SORTING AMBIGUITY; DEVELOPING THE MIND

> Catherine listened with astonishment; she knew not how to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing. (NA 46)

Introduction

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is an early nineteenth-century novel that explicitly discusses acts of reading and the fears and benefits attributed to novel reading. Catherine Morland's deficiency described in the epigraph frames the central conflict of the novel…her difficulty in reconciling ambiguity. In the same was as her literary predecessor, Charlotte Lennox, Jane Austen focuses her analysis on her heroine's progress from naïve to sophisticated reader. Moreover, as in Lennox's novel, Austen's readers are encouraged to understand the conditions and stimuli for Catherine's progress. Austen wants her readers to develop reading and reasoning skills to become sophisticated readers able to "reconcile different accounts of the same thing."

Austen's perspectives about novel reading are different in important ways than those imagined by many of her predecessors. Austen emphasizes the positive, even necessary, practice of Catherine's absorbed novel reading that helps her to recognize and negotiate ambiguity. I argue that in *Northanger Abbey*, rather than echoing the potential dangers of novel reading, the text presents the opposite, demonstrating through Catherine

how to negotiate ambiguity. Catherine is a new kind of heroine whose increasingly self-managed decisions—balancing emotional and rational responses—contribute to her development as a sophisticated, self-regulated woman.

Austen counters predecessors' arguments that young readers should view only unambiguous and morally instructive texts. She argues that Catherine is well-read but ill-prepared due to her nonreflective reading. Austen's view is a significant departure from the objective, didactic and authority-based educational formulas. Samuel Johnson for example argues, "The highest degree of reverence should be paid to youth, and […] nothing indecent should be suffered to approach their eyes or ears […] the best examples only should be exhibited"(156).[48] Clara Reeve warns, "The books that are put into the hands of youth, do in great measure direct their pursuits and determine their characters; it is therefore of the first consequence that they should be well-chosen" (Vol. II, 59).[49] Maria Edgeworth contends, "With respect to sentimental stories, and books of mere entertainment, we must remark, that they should be sparingly used, especially in the education of girls" (*Essays* Vol. I, 426).[50]

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[48] Here is a larger excerpt of *Rambler No. 4* in which Johnson argues, "The highest degree of reverence should be paid to youth, and that nothing indecent should be suffered to approach their eyes or ears, are precepts extorted by sense and virtue from an ancient writer, by no means eminent for chastity of thought. The same kind, though not the same degree of caution, is required in everything which is laid before them, to secure them from unjust prejudices, perverse opinions, and incongruous combinations of images…but if the power of example is so great as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited; and that which is likely to operate so strongly should not be mischievous or uncertain in its effects" (156-157).

[49] Clara Reeve's "The Progress of Romance" repeatedly remarks about the dangers of what youth read. Among the many warnings, these are the most poignant. "The books that are put into the hands of youth, do in great measure direct their pursuits and determine their characters; it is therefore of the first consequence that they should be well-chosen" (Evening XI, 59). "From this kind of reading, young people fancy themselves capable of judging of men and manners, and that they are knowing, while involved in the profoundest ignorance. They believe themselves wiser than their parents and guardians, whom they treat with contempt and ridicule. Thus armed with ignorance, conceit, and folly, they plunge into the world and its dissipations, and who can wonder if they become its victims?" (Evening 12, 79).

[50] Maria Edgeworth warns, "With respect to sentimental stories, and books of mere entertainment, we must remark, that they should be sparingly used, especially in the education of girls. We know, from common

I argue that didactic texts are largely ineffective in forming minds that can effectively negotiate complexity and competing perspectives. Samuel Johnson and his kindred critics contend that readers are helped or hurt by the *content* of the reading material. This is a specific claim that Austen refutes. She argues that *how* we read is more important than *what* we read (Benedict 4). What Landy calls reader *formation*[51] through sophisticated reading is more consequential than acquiring *information*. Landy argues that benefits gained from sorting ambiguity in fiction lie in their developmental rather than informational effect:

> There is, I will claim, a set of texts that we might label "formative-fictions," texts whose function it is to fine-tune our mental capacities. Rather than providing knowledge per se—whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation—what they give us is *know-how*; rather than transmitting beliefs, what they equip us with are *skills*; rather than teaching, what they do is *train*. They are not informative, that is, but formative…they serve over time, to hone our abilities and thus, in the end, to help us become who we are. (10)[52]

Similarly, two hundred years before Landy, Austen proposes a parallel idea that young women could learn to respond to life's complexity by sharpening their intellectual capacities. She shows in *Northanger Abbey* how these capacities might be developed through reading—particularly reading novels. Jodie Wyett illuminates Austen's theory:

> Though many eighteenth-century readers and modern scholars alike have focused on the means of *curing* the female quixote, Austen's fiction, in particular, shifts the focus away from reforming the heroine. For Austen,

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experience, the effects which are produced upon the female mind by immoderate novel-reading. Besides the danger of creating a romantic taste, there is reason to believe, that the species of reading to which we object has an effect directly opposite to what it is intended to produce. It diminishes, instead of increasing, the sensibility of the heart" (Vol I, Ch. 12).

[51] The concept of *formation* is a central argument Joshua Landy's "How to Do Things with Fictions."

[52] Landy's arguments are not based on novels; rather he is discussing texts including New Testament parable, poetry and even magic acts that stimulate reasoning. His arguments, however, apply to many novels. Novels that present multiple and often contradictory accounts of characters and actions force readers to apply their own reason, judgments and conclusions, thus developing sophisticated tools and methodologies for sorting ambiguity.

> quixotism models show how engaged fiction reading initiates socialization and subsequently functions both to enable and emancipate the increasingly overdetermined and intertwined categories of women's reading and women's writing. (262)

Agreeing with Landy and Austen, Wyett argues that *Northanger Abbey* portrays the formative aspects of novel reading, thus restoring the reputation of both novel and novel reader. Wyett summarizes, "We see the strains of an emerging ideology that characterizes novel reading as beneficial to readers for reasons beyond moral instruction" (263). Though Catherine learns lessons from reading, they are not primarily moral ones. Joe Bray adds, "Reading, rather than misleading and seducing the heroine, can be a prompt to thought and enquiry, and a means by which she can understand both herself and the world more clearly" (27). I contend that one of Austen's most important projects in this novel is training her audience in critical reading through observing Catherine's example and, importantly, through the complications Austen deploys in the text by her use of character duplicity, ironic commentary and free indirect discourse.

Reader Development

Concurrently, while displaying Catherine's intellectual maturation, Austen employs ambiguities within the novel to encourage the same sophisticated reading in her audience that is increasingly evidenced in Catherine. Readers given approximately the same knowledge of characters in the novel that Catherine has must recognize ambiguities in dialog and behavior and synthesize resolutions for these discontinuities. Marilyn Butler expands this discussion of reader training:

> A naïve, inexperienced heroine stands at the threshold of life and needs to discriminate between true friends and false. The evidence she is given are words and a system of values they express; so that the reader, clever, or at least more cleverly directed than Catherine, is able to make the correct

> discriminations for himself as the action unfolds… In all of these conversations the reader is not asked to criticize certain novels, nor the habit of novel reading, but rather to consider the habits of mind which the different speakers reveal. (173)

While I agree with most of Butler's argument, I contend that a first-time reader of *Northanger Abbey* will *not* make many "correct discriminations for himself," but will make many of the same mistakes in judgment that Catherine does. In the novel, none of the characters prove to be consistently reliable informants, including especially the narrator. The attentive reader observes conflicting words and behaviors, as well as competing accounts of the same character. Even public opinion as described by the narrator must be scrutinized.

In one of his first debates with Catherine, Henry expresses notions that he claims are *universally acknowledged* and gender-specific. Henry tells Catherine that, "[He] is not ignorant of young ladies' ways" (NA 16). He argues, as if it were fact, what women should write, who their writings should be shared with and how writing a journal helps to develop women's writing proficiency. He positions the strength of his argument in public opinion. "*Everybody* allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female" (NA 16). Thus begins the challenge to Catherine's and readers' naiveté. Henry, as well as the narrator, make pronouncements derived from public opinion, which Catherine and readers might easily assimilate but should probably challenge. In this early argument, Catherine models for readers an effective rebuff of Henry's opinions. She argues, "I have sometimes thought…whether ladies do write so much better letters than gentlemen! That is—I should not think the superiority was always on our side" (NA 16). Here Catherine helps readers critically examine Henry's assertions of *fact* and unverified *public opinion*. The irony evidenced in this early display of Catherine's intelligent

argument is that the narrator told readers that Catherine is "ignorant and uniformed," yet in this early test of her wit and reasoning, she proves to be a capable intellectual opponent. Readers learn not only from Catherine's example to question Henry's generalizations but also about the narrator's demonstrated unreliability.

In other subsequent intellectual challenges, Catherine does not succeed quite as well. This is particularly true in her frequent repartee with Henry. In one conversation among Henry, Eleanor and Catherine, Eleanor asks Henry to, "Make Miss Morland understand yourself…Miss Morland is not used to your odd ways" (83). What Catherine does not understand or appreciate about Henry is that he frequently employs humorous banter and says things that he does not mean. Catherine rarely gets the joke. In the use of banter, John Thorpe and Henry Tilney are similar. They both say things in jest. Both are attracted to Catherine and both want to win her affections. Both largely fail in their attempts, partly because Catherine is not accustomed to this kind of doubled speech. She does not recognize variations in tone and ways that words can be used to hide intent. She also seems to never understand Henry's meaning when he is being humorous or sarcastic. Readers also must decipher John's and Henry's speech from their underlying motives.

In one instance, Henry states, "Miss Morland, no one can think more highly of the understanding of women than I do. In my opinion, nature has given them so much, that they never find it necessary to use more than half" (83). This is an instance where the reader likely understands more of the joke than Catherine. He implies that women are *half-wits*, a joke which readers may comprehend, but Catherine does not. Eleanor attempts to help Catherine account for the layered discourse, "But I do assure you that he must be entirely misunderstood, if he can ever appear to say an unjust thing of any

woman at all, or an unkind one of me" (Ibid.). The narrator also participates in helping the reader understand the fractured communications, explaining, "It was no effort to Catherine to believe that Henry Tilney could never be wrong…and what she did not understand, she was almost as ready to admire, as what she did" (Ibid.). Though Eleanor explicitly explains to Catherine Henry's mode of banter, Catherine does not assimilate the instruction; her noncritical reception of Henry's playful rhetoric is the weakest point in her judgment. She admires everything he says and fails to discern humor.

Jacqueline Pearson in *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835 – A Dangerous Recreation* reviews several eighteenth-century critics who warn of danger to female novel readers. She contrasts these historical arguments with theories that suggest the benefit of reading in a woman's development. She emphasizes the degree to which *Northanger Abbey* points to reading and its several possible effects:

> Although for some critics the centrality of the Gothic criticism has obscured this point, *Northanger Abbey* is fundamentally concerned with reading, and writing, as a woman: reading and writing not only Gothic (and other) novels, but also periodicals, poetry, epitaphs, newspapers, history, moral fables and essays, letters, journals, and even laundry lists. More than any other Austen lovers, Catherine Morland's and Henry Tilney's relationship grows through discussions of gender, language and textuality. (Pearson 210)

Pearson emphasizes that *Northanger Abbey* expands intertextual literary discussions beyond those about novels. Like Wyett and Landy, Pearson points to the formative possibilities that occur when a young woman reads intelligently. In Catherine's case, her reading and discussions with Thorpes and Tilneys leads to an expanding comprehension of social norms and public expectations.

Growing Her Mind

To convincingly demonstrate Catherine's growth and the stimuli that prompt it, Austen initially describes Catherine's mind as though it is a blank slate. Then, as the novel advances, she writes progress reports on that slate with each successful (or unsuccessful) decision. The *blank-slate* condition is important in organizing Austen's illustration. Her argument is that an ordinary[53] woman from a middle-class family may advance in her education and sophistication, not by exceptional tutoring or extensive reading of carefully chosen materials, but through careful observation of complexity within her readings accompanied by a continual sharpening of reasoning. In the first two chapters, Austen refers to Catherine's mental ability four times. On the first page of the novel, the narrator declares, "And not less unpropitious for heroism seemed her mind" (5). This is an important assessment. For Catherine to succeed as a *heroine,* she will need to improve her *mind*. John Mathison explains, "It is a character's achieving maturity that makes her a heroine. For, to achieve genuine understanding of oneself and the world is difficult…in the novels few of the characters have done so or ever will" (140). A few lines later, the narrator completely cleans the slate of Catherine's mind. "She never could learn or understand any thing before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive and occasionally stupid" (5). One page later, we find that, "She shirked her lessons in writing and accounts, whenever she could" (6). At the age of fourteen, Catherine preferred sports and horseback riding over books, "Or at least books

[53] By ordinary, I mean that Catherine has no heroic traits; she is not exceptionally beautiful, not particularly well educated, is not currently extraordinarily wealthy and is not destined to receive a large inheritance. She also has not been abandoned by father and mother. She has normal relationships with her brothers and sisters, as well as with neighbors. In short, there is nothing exceptional about Catherine, which might advance her progress in reasoning.

of information—for provided they were all story and *no reflection*, she had never any objection to books at all" (7). Why does Austen want to thoroughly zero-base her not-yet-a-heroine's mental capacities? She is establishing the lower end of possibility. Her suggestion is that if Catherine can develop from a thoughtless adolescent into a sophisticated reader over the period of a few months, then it is likely others could. Importantly, Austen also is redefining what it means to be a heroine. As Mathison suggests, Austen's concept of a heroine is one that achieves a stable subjective state by gaining a deeper understanding of herself and her relationships to those around her. Being beautiful, enduring difficult circumstances and marrying well—the tropes for romantic heroines—are largely replaced by personal rational development in this novel.

The key to progress for Catherine is *reflection*, not accumulation of knowledge. Austen explains that in Catherine's early years, she read for *the story* and did *not reflect* on what she was reading. As a youth, she did not employ books as guides. From ages fifteen to seventeen, she read portions of texts from Pope, Shakespeare and Thompson (7). The narrator explains that Catherine was reading from texts that heroines use, "To supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives" (7). Though she read them, she never draws upon them for comfort in her "vicissitudes." The narrator suggests that Catherine was reading what was expected in the course of her self-education, but that there was neither interface with others nor personal reflection about what she was reading.

The narrator's review of Catherine's early literary experiences does, however, recall that, "Catherine was [not] *always stupid*—by no means; she learnt the fable of *The Hare and Many Friends*, as quickly as any girl in England" (6). This poem as well as the

literary texts she had read supplied her with maxims—warnings about the dangers and complexities of life. But, when Austen says Catherine had "learnt" the fable by heart, it is one of the many instances where her meaning is ambiguous. Up to this point in the novel, Catherine has *learnt* very little about reflection and reasoning. Austen is critiquing the inadequacy of Catherine's reading skills. She has read, been entertained, even memorized excerpts, but these activities have not developed into sophisticated reading practices and reflection.

Austen critically examines what it means to learn from reading. She suggests that memorization of poetry and maxims is inadequate since it does not develop decision-making skills. For Austen, learning must include reflection and unraveling ambiguity. These are skills Austen adds to Catherine's formerly blank slate through a progression of decision-making challenges. Before she takes Catherine to Bath, Austen baselines Catherine's mental capacities, eliminating the possibility that readers might assign to Catherine greater rational skills than she possesses:

> Her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind—her manners just removed from the awkwardness and shyness of a girl; her person pleasing and, when in good looks, pretty—and her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is. (9)

Austen assesses Catherine's competency employing irony that she uses to train her readers. In this instance, the reader must again re-evaluate the narrator's assessment of Catherine, the supposedly, "Ignorant and uninformed female mind at seventeen." Do readers agree that all seventeen-year-old minds are ignorant? Is it only the *female* mind that is ignorant? If readers credit the narrator with reliability in this assessment, are they not performing the same simple, nonreflective reading that Austen is critiquing?

The two overlapping apparatuses of ambiguity that Austen employs to challenge simple reading are irony and free indirect discourse. In both of these stylistic devices, the narrator communicates with the reader and provides accepted versions of judgments. Sometimes, the narrator appeals to public opinion as the standard of judgement. The novel's first words, "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine" (NA 5), appeals to public opinion as a device to solicit reader agreement. The words suggest that an average reader would make the same judgment. In the same sentence, the narrator suggests both the idea that Catherine will be a heroine in this novel and that she does not appear to be heroic. This is one of the many authoritative yet contradictory statements by the narrator that require readers to assess the competing statements and synthesize their own understanding.

Out of the Nursery – Into Society

In the first two chapters, Austen presents Catherine as a carefully constructed example, through whom she makes her argument about women's education and their potential rational capacities. Additionally, the early chapters of *Northanger Abbey* function like an overture in a musical, during which the audience is introduced to the important recurring themes that will appear later. For instance, the narrator borrows a line from Shakespeare that Catherine had read and instructs readers that, "The poor beetle, which we tread upon, in corporal sufferance feels a pang as great, as when a giant dies" (7). These lines point reader attention to the seemingly insignificant level of characters and events and suggest that Catherine's adventures will be of a more ordinary kind. Austen suggests that the ordinary events of a young girl's life can be both interesting and instructive—as interesting and instructive as any found in romance novels.

This is a playful and important moment when Austen introduces her heroine and foreshadows the plot. She invites readers to consider more thoroughly than Catherine the literary texts that might have prepared her for entry into society. Wolfgang Iser's description of reader response activity is particularly helpful in understanding Austen's work in these introductory chapters. He argues that "The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play" (108). Austen hints at themes which alert perceptive readers. Iser explains that from the "wandering viewpoint" of a narrator, "The whole text can never be perceived." Because of this, he suggests that "Instead of finding out whether the text gives an accurate or inaccurate description of the object, he has to build up the object himself—often in a manner running counter to the familiar world evoked by the text" (109). The early chapters of *Northanger Abbey* are Austen's invitation to readers to do some detective work in order to make sense of the extensive discussion of Catherine's literary background. Why does Austen specifically cite Gay's "The Hare and Many Friends" in her list of Catherine's early reading repertoire? An early nineteenth-century reader might be familiar with this poem. Modern readers, however, miss its foreshadowing activity.[54] The fable explains that the hare's many [supposed] friends all disappear when danger is near, at the moment that the hare needs them most (358). In citing this poem, Austen cleverly previews the organizational and thematic structure of the novel for attentive readers. Passive readers will miss this clue. This is a moment when Austen encourages

[54] I have included a copy of the entire poem at the end of this chapter for modern reader review. The various stanzas of the poem, particularly those in which each friend rejects the hare's urgent requests for help, closely parallel Catherine's experience in learning about *friends'* unreliability.

her audience to be more reflective in reading the poem than Catherine. As a youth, Catherine spends little time *reflecting* on preparatory texts. This is a deficiency Austen wants her readers to avoid. Readers are encouraged to bring in to play their own thoughts about the literary citations. Iser summarizes:

> If the wandering viewpoint defines itself by way of the changing perspectives, it follows that throughout the reading past perspective segments must be retained in each present moment. The new moment is not isolated, but stands out against the old, and so the past will remain as a background to the present, exerting influence on it and, at the same time, itself being modified by the present. (114)

A sophisticated reader will at least remember the literary citations and imagine ways that they might contribute to the narrative. Without reflection naïve readers will discover their significance only in retrospect. Like the referenced hare, Catherine imagines everyone she meets in Bath is her friend. One-by-one, she learns that they are not. By the end of the novel, reflecting on her many disappointments, Catherine and most readers comprehend the significance of the warning expressed in *The Hare and Many Friends*—genuine friendships are rare and should not be assumed.

Catherine increasingly learns that ideas presented in literature can be projected onto personal experience and can assist in interpreting complexities of interpersonal relationships. Catherine's eventual maturation positions her favorably between her two earlier extremes of bad reading. Initially, she reads for entertainment without reflection. Later, she sometimes reads like a quixote, applying fictional texts as potential models for her own life. In her early nonreflective reading, she misses the potential formational value of reading—that reading could provide more than amusement. The readings from Pope, Shakespeare, Gay and others provided models that could have helped her understand similar future disappointing events. In her later quixotic reading, she

appropriates fictional content without reflection, as though it were fact, preventing her from seeing gothic novels as another way of displaying the problems of human relations. The solution to both of these extremes for Catherine and for readers is *reflection* that guides toward self-responsible reading, adaptation and application.

Looking Inside

The most important ability that Catherine develops in the course of the novel is the ability to look inside—to see more than what is evident. The desire to see inside is represented in several events of the novel, which work as metaphors. When Isabella asks Catherine how far she has read in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, she responds, "I am got to the black veil" (NA 25). Isabella replies, "How delightful! Oh! I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are not you wild to know?" (Ibid). Catherine's response here is indicative of her desire to unravel mysteries by her own intellect. "Oh! Yes, quite; what can it be?—But do not tell me—I would not be told upon any account" (Ibid). Catherine's progress by *looking inside* is an important idea for Austen. She begins by unraveling mysteries hidden in material objects—the black veil, the locked cabinet and the sealed death-bed room. In parallel, she learns to look inside the duplicity of the Thorpes and the Tilneys. In order to make informed decisions about friendships, Catherine needs to comprehend a person's inner motivations in addition to their observable behavior. This is required equally of Austen's readers. Together, they must observe actions and hear dialog, comparing the evident aspects with internal clues.

While readers may account for ambiguity at generally the same pace as Catherine, on a few occasions, they are offered more access to character internality through Austen's use of free indirect discourse. She occasionally delivers a character's discourse and a

revelation of that character's mental rumination—information that is often opposite to what has been said. This disclosure of thought trains readers to compare external clues with internal motivations. Austen's free indirect discourse functions similarly to Lennox's chapter titles. The author uses these devices to interact privately with readers, ensuring that that they observe the multiple possibilities offered by the narrative and caution that narratives are not always reliable. Blakey Vermeule comments:

> Free indirect discourse is…the technique for rendering a character's thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration…It allows a writer to express sympathy and distance from her character at the same time. It demands of the reader a signal critical attention. (75-76)

Birthe Tandrup adds, "The use of free indirect style…serves to include reader consciousness in her novel. Free indirect style gives access to a fictional character's mind in a way that neither direct speech nor inner monologue does; it may appropriately be called the fictional equivalent of dramatic soliloquy" (86). Tandrup explains that while this style appears to give greater clarity of understanding, if often obscures rather than clarifies: "[Free indirect discourse] contains elements of unreliability which may make the reader fall into "traps" of misreading" (Ibid). When readers are given access to a character's mind, they may assume they have an accurate view. The character's mind often competes with the narrator's view—and both may be unreliable.

Austen's use of free indirect discourse helps train her audience in sophisticated reading. With it, she reminds readers that internal thoughts are an important part of understanding the person. In this novel, the device is used infrequently and the reader must, like Catherine, imagine, suspect and theorize the hidden motivations. Narelle Shaw adds that, "The intrusion of the narrator's voice opportunely underlines the irony" (3). It

points to the deliberate disconnects or rationalizations that are occurring in the actor, even as they deliver words intended to hide meaning and intent. For instance, during her first stormy night in Northanger Abbey, Catherine searches every drawer and cabinet for hidden letters but finds none—there is, however, one final unexplored drawer. Employing free indirect discourse, the author compares Catherine's thoughts and differing actions. "She had 'never from the first had the smallest idea of finding any thing in any part of the cabinet, and was not in the least disappointed at her ill success thus far, it would be foolish not to examine it thoroughly while she was about it'" (124). The attentive reader realizes what Catherine is saying to herself is exactly opposite to what she believes. She *did expect* to find cryptic documents or she would not have examined every drawer—and she *was* disappointed. The observant reader is able to enjoy the humorous contrast between her thoughts and actions, that even she is incapable of perceiving.

Catherine Learns to Reflect

There are frequent instances in the text that point to Catherine's growing ability to learn new ideas and apply them in ways that result in her incremental growth. She begins to demonstrate maturity and confidence in her own ideas. In an early encounter, Henry Tilney compares dancing and marriage saying they are similar things. "I consider a country dance as an emblem of marriage. Fidelity and complaisance are the principal duties of both" (54). Catherine does not agree, and tells him, "Yes, to be sure, as you state it, all this sounds very well; but still they are so very different—I cannot look upon them at all in the same light, nor think the same duties belong to them" (55). Henry replies and tells Catherine how she must have arrived at her viewpoint. Again, Catherine disagrees. "No, indeed, I never thought of that" (Ibid). In this instance, as well as others throughout

the text, Catherine demonstrates her growing ability to decipher discrepancies in the logic and metaphors of her interlocutors. She is certainly not "stupid" as the narrator earlier suggested. While her thinking and reasoning are not fully developed at the beginning of the novel, her experiences enhance and augment her already capable mind.

Later in the novel, while viewing the scenery in the countryside near Bath, Catherine does comprehend there are gaps in her knowledge of the world and that some of what she knows needs to be unlearned or relearned. This realization, however, is not an indictment of her reasoning; rather, it suggests an active response to what she knows and does not know:

> They were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. Here Catherine was quite lost. She knew nothing of drawing—nothing of taste:—and she listened to them with an attention which brought her little profit, for they talked in phrases which conveyed scarcely any idea to her. The little which she could understand however appeared to contradict the very few notions she had entertained on the matter before. (80)

This is one of several instances in which Catherine's ignorance of a particular subject is revealed. The narrator explains that Catherine willingly assents to her lack of information but she wants to improve:

> In the present instance, she confessed and lamented her want of knowledge: declared that she would give anything in the world to be able to draw; and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him, and her attention was so earnest, that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. (81)

Catherine's willingness to learn is evident. Though her motivations are mixed—affection for Henry encourages her learning—she reveals a desire to become a competent judge of aesthetic beauty. She realizes the gaps in her knowledge and works to eliminate them.

Joe Bray argues in *The Female Reader in The English Novel* that Catherine demonstrates a mature ability to sort information, understand its meaning and apply what she has learned accurately—on most occasions. He explains that her reading of novels rarely displaces her world view as an overlay for her discourse world. She is, more often than not, a reader positioned in her own world, rather than a reader who is creating and overlaying an imaginary world. She evidences reader maturity that argues against Johnson's negative characterization of young readers' capabilities. Bray explains:

> The 'female quixote plot' in the novel is less straightforward than may at first appear. To say that Catherine is simply confusing 'discourse' and 'text' worlds, and mistakenly 'identifying' with 'an enactor' in the 'text world' does not fully capture the complexities of the reading processes represented in the novel. Closer examination reveals that Catherine is to some degree aware of the mistakes she is making, and that, even as she is fully immersed in the world of her favorite reading, she retains one foot in the 'discourse world' of her immediate situation. (148)

Attentive reading of *Northanger Abbey* reveals that Catherine only occasionally overlays textual references from fiction onto her discourse world, and in those instances, she uses the fictional reference only as a point of comparison. For instance, she compares the scenery of the hills surrounding Bath to similar descriptions of scenery that she is reading about in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. In this example, she does not impose the text as a standard for how to view scenery; rather, she employs her very limited library of similar examples, and draws from the descriptions in *Udolpho* to establish a point of reference. Later in the novel, she employs the tropes of gothic novels to help fill in missing elements in General Tilney's behavior and tyranny over his family and to develop an account of the death of his wife.

In the first instance, Catherine's remarks are similar to a traveler or a reader who compares a geographic place that is new to them with one with which they are familiar.

While observing Bath's Beechen Cliff, Catherine comments, "I never look at it . . . without thinking of the south of France" (77). When queried by Henry concerning the extent of her travels abroad, Catherine clarifies, "I only mean what I have read about. It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through in *Mysteries of Udolpho*" (77). This is not a typical quixotic reading that imposes fictional material onto real experience. This instance of Catherine's reference to a fictional narrative is different from those in *Don Quixote* and in *The Female Quixote*. Moreover, as soon as she is confronted with the suggestion that her words imply greater experience than she has, she quickly corrects the misunderstanding. As the novel progresses, Catherine is committed increasingly to understanding what is represented by reading and conversations. She works to achieve the same clarity in her own conversations. It is important to note that neither Henry nor Eleanor disagree with her comparison of locales by using a literary reference. They simply want to understand the basis of Catherine's comment and comparison.

In the second instance, Catherine attempts to account for the abusive behavior of General Tilney. The narrator allows the reader to understand Catherine's growing concerns about General Tilney:

> Her tranquility was not improved by the General's impatience for the appearance of his eldest son, nor by the displeasure he expressed at his laziness, when Captain Tilney at last came down. She was quite pained by the severity of his father's reproof, which seemed disproportionate to the offence. (112)

She knows some things about the General from her own observation. Additionally, she compiles other information from Henry's and Eleanor's words, silences and emotions. While traveling in General Tilney's coach on the way to Northanger Abbey, Catherine

observes him carefully and concludes:

> General Tilney, though so charming a man, seemed always a check upon his children's spirits, and scarcely any thing was said but by himself; the observation of which, was his discontent at whatever the inn afforded, and his angry impatience at the waiters, made Catherine grow every moment more in awe of him. (113)

Even before their arrival at the Tilney estate, Catherine forms an accurate opinion of General Tilney—that he is insensitive to his grown children and that below the generally congenial exterior, he is a bully. Furthermore, she adds bits of information that she learns about Mrs. Tilney that Eleanor provides in her undecipherable history of her mother's death. Recalling from her reading of gothic novels about evil husbands and that some of them imprison or dispose of their wives, Catherine employs fictional texts to fill in gaps in her own personal experience that assist her in assembling a plausible explanation of the mystery. While Catherine fails in some of her conclusions, her observations of the family dynamic and her suspicions about General Tilney prove to be accurate. Though he was not his wife's jailor or murderer, he proves to be capable of duplicity and cruel behavior toward his own family and toward Catherine.

While her reading of novels occasionally leads her to employ fictional material to describe places or explain events in her discourse world, excessive attachment to the fictional world is not her greatest weakness. Catherine's greatest weakness is her inexperience with identifying and deciphering ambiguity; and ambiguity thoroughly permeates Catherine's world in Bath and at Northanger Abbey. Jodi Wyett argues that Austen radically refashions the model of the female quixote. She contends, "That by providing Catherine Morland with no entirely adequate mentors—Austen positions Catherine's quixotism as the only means by which she comes to know and understand her

social world and the motives of those within it" (268).

It is precisely the multiple kinds and levels of ambiguity that challenge Catherine that also challenge Austen's readers. Catherine lacks an experiential reference and is initially unused to duplicity and wit. The narrator explains:

> Catherine listened with astonishment; she knew not how to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing; for she had not been brought ups to understand the propensities of a rattle, nor to know to how many idle assertions and impudent falsehoods the excess of vanity will lead. (46)

The challenge to readers replicates Catherine's challenge, that of "no entirely adequate mentors." In the same way that Mrs. Allen and Isabella Thorpe are positioned to be the adequate and logical mentors for Catherine, the narrator is positioned to be the logical and adequate guide for readers; but, all of these guides prove to be inadequate. Mrs. Allen fails, due to neglect of her responsibility and unwillingness to pay attention to Catherine's activities and affections. Isabella fails because of her duplicitous affections for James Morland and then Captain Tilney. The narrator relates Catherine's inability to comprehend circumstances she sees. They do not fit expected patterns and her guides do not reveal what they know. Consequently, Catherine must ponder quixotically, seeking plausible explanations:

> It seemed to her that Captain Tilney was falling in love with Isabella, and Isabella unconsciously was encouraging him; unconsciously it must be, for Isabella's attachment to James was as certain and well acknowledged as her engagement. To doubt her truth or good intentions was impossible, and yet, during the whole of their conversation her manner had been odd. (107)

Catherine and readers must unravel personal expectations from evident behavior. The problem with Catherine's reading is her certainty that Isabella could not, and therefore, would not be untruthful or unfaithful. That was "impossible." The problem for the reader

is the power of socially constructed expectations; the narrator explains that Isabella's attachment was "certain and well acknowledged." Here is another example of the powerful effect on the reader of public opinion and narratorial insistence of Catherine's confidence in Isabella's reliability. Catherine and readers must judge in an environment of assumed certainty built on absent or incorrect information. This is a moment that Catherine and readers must sort ambiguity and independently seek plausible explanations.

Deciphering Ambiguity

Austen employs several intertwined sources of ambiguity in *Northanger Abbey* that Catherine and readers must decipher—the ambiguity of competing word pairs, the uncertainty of word meanings (often due to narrator irony) and the discrepancies between speech and performance. For Austen, reading and misinterpreting contribute to the misunderstanding of others. When there is more than one possible meaning of a word or an act, ambiguity is induced. Maturation requires Catherine and readers to develop the ability to sort the best from among possible competing meanings. Avrom Fleishman suggests that *Northanger Abbey* is a novel about developing this skill. He emphasizes that Catherine's important growth is discerning the utility of information gained from literary sources and adding additional breadth to her literary and aesthetic tools. He argues that:

> Catherine . . . is matched against not one or another of the antagonists encountered in the course of her travels, but against the entire network of tacit assumptions and habitual behavior which constitutes the individual's cultural milieu. How she learns to make her way in the world by acquiring the cultural forms under which its members order their own thought and conduct—this is the universal drama which *Northanger Abbey* instances. (23)

Catherine's primary weaknesses are her limited reflection on what she reads and her

incomplete understanding of how literary discourse might be appropriately applied in a prosaic world. Novels offer a possible training tool that might enhance her detection of and response to ambiguity. Fleishman theorizes how that awareness develops:

> In general, we can say that the unshaped mind picks up the formulas available to it in the literature of its social milieu but selects and emphasizes according to the apparently fixed dispositions of age and temperament, i.e., there is a natural element at work amid the cultural process. . . Moral dicta thus must compete with natural impulses, but they provide the forum of decision and the limits of conduct. (24-25)

While Fleishman suggests that "The unshaped mind picks up the formulas," the narrator indicates that the process is not working well in Catherine's case, or at least for her, moral and ethical cues are obscure. What Catherine is missing during most of the novel is an understanding of the way that maxims and literary examples might be useful. As she is leaving Bath, through her own reasoning, she is beginning to comprehend John Thorpe's amorous advances toward her. She clearly perceives Mrs. Allen's failure to guide and advise her, and she is beginning to recognize that Isabella is capable of at least duplicity, if not treachery. Prior reflection on Gay's poem and on the antagonists in her gothic novels might have assisted her in understanding her own unraveling relationships. The narrator provides no indications that such reflection is occurring. At the divide between Volumes I and II, perceptive readers likely see the relational conflicts more clearly than Catherine. Fleishman suggests:

> The heroine must therefore be instructed in the approved way of taking her literary experiences: not as simple schemes for perceiving the world around her, but as highly charged symbols whose forms add shadow and depth to the prosaic. In the end she must learn to take the Gothic novels not as alternatives to the given but as enrichments and articulations of it. (32)

Her instruction in "The approved way of taking her literary experiences," results from the

various disappointments she experiences, rather than from any perception of similar models from her reading. She begins to see unreliable friends whose declarations are frequently and increasingly reversed by their actions. As Catherine is learning about uncertainty and ambiguity in novels, she also begins to experience incongruities in her closest relationships, though there is no confirmation from the narrator that Catherine sees linkages between the two.

Conflicting Descriptions

The first of the narratorial ambiguities is the pairing of disparate words. This particular activity challenges readers, since it is located primarily in narration, rather than the dialog. In Vol I, Chapter 9, the narrator delivers three of these oppositional pairs in rapid succession. About Isabella, the narrator states, "So with *smiles* of most exquisite *misery*, and the *laughing* eye of utter *despondency*, she bade her friend adieu and went on." In the next sentence, "Catherine found Mrs. Allen just returned from all the *busy idleness* of the morning" (NA 47). These pairings of opposite descriptive words, while entertaining, increase reader attention to the challenge of competing meanings. Had Mrs. Allen been busy all morning, or had she been idle? Or, perhaps, the words describe a happy state of doing nothing significant. Readers must synthesize their own meaning, assessing which pole of the paired words is the more significant.

In another place, Catherine suggests that "the historians [take] so much trouble in filling great volumes, which, as I used to think, nobody would willingly ever look into, to be laboring only for the *torment* of little boys and girls, always struck me as a hard fate" (79). Henry responds, "I use the verb 'to torment,' as I observed to be your own method, instead of 'to instruct,' supposing them to be now admitted as synonymous" (80). This is

another of those competing word meanings, which, though humorous, calls attention to the ironic possibilities when a single word is used in a different way by two people. Henry's argument is that Catherine's word choice is inelegant, if not completely incorrect. Catherine, rather than retracting her parallel use of the words, explains why hers is an appropriate choice based on her own experiences. She argues, "If you had been as much used as myself to hear poor little children first learning . . . as I am in the habit of seeing almost every day of my life at home, you would allow that to *torment* and *instruct* might sometimes be used as synonymous words" (Ibid.). This argument about semantical possibilities constitutes a lesson for Henry's listeners and Austen's readers. Catherine argues that the use and meaning of words cannot always be narrowly defined, and that the context contributes substantially to meaning. What is noteworthy about this discussion is that it calls attention to Henry's own bifurcated instructional methodology when he criticizes women's misunderstandings and word choice; he tends to torment more often than instruct. His methods prove Catherine's argument. She possesses a strong sense of choice in the words she employs and demonstrates courage of her convictions about her word selection. This is especially true in instances when her own experiences contribute to her word choice.

A central and important example of the conflict between word's meaningfulness and meaninglessness is the word *nice*, as it is employed by Catherine. She asks, "Do you not think *Udolpho* the nicest book in the world?" Henry critiques her use of the word, "The nicest—by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding" (78). Here Henry *torments* rather than instructs. In this instance, Catherine again defends her own use of the word as being appropriate. "I am sure," cried Catherine, "I did

not mean to say anything wrong; but it is a nice book, and why should not I call it so?" Henry counter argues that the word *nice* is overused. "It does for everything. Originally perhaps it was applied only to express neatness, propriety, delicacy, or refinement;—people were nice in their dress, in their sentiments, or their choice. But now every commendation on every subject is comprised in that one word" (78). Henry argues that if words are not employed accurately, they may communicate nothing. Catherine's precision in determining word meaning is developing. Catherine and readers are becoming increasingly aware of the potential for word usage discontinuities. Finally, I point to the conversation in which Eleanor misconstrues Catherine's words:

> The general pause which succeeded his short disquisition on the state of the nation, was put to an end by Catherine, who in rather a solemn tone of voice, uttered these words, 'I have heard that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London.'
>
> Miss Tilney, to whom this was chiefly addressed, was startled, and hastily replied, 'Indeed!—and of what nature?'
>
> 'That I do not know, nor who is the author. I have only heard that it is to be more horrible than any thing we have met with yet.' (82)

This misunderstanding by Eleanor is generated by the phrase "something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London." Catherine is describing publication of a new book. Eleanor imagines she is describing revolutionary activity or a notable crime that will occur soon in London. Henry interposes himself as a translator and asks, "Come, shall I make you understand each other, or leave you to puzzle out an explanation as you can" (Ibid)? Henry criticizes Eleanor for her error in discernment--more *tormenting*. He explains that Catherine is talking about publication of a new novel, not about, "A mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George's Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood . . ." (Ibid). This is an important conversation in several ways. First, it is an example of how words mislead, especially

when the receiver infers a meaning based on her own imagination. In this case, Eleanor is the one who is guilty of injudicious processing of a conversation. Though she has more reading and life experience than Catherine, she mistakes the meaning of "something very shocking," and creates an imaginative interpretation. The conversation among these three also functions as another mini-lesson to Austen's own readers. The entire plot—relational conflicts and disrupted romances—swirls around the vortex of misunderstood words and meanings. The antidote is for listeners to be discerning in their reception and analysis of words and behaviors. Austen's project in this novel is similar to Henry's offer to clarify. Austen, within the multilayered ambiguity of her novel, asks readers, "Shall I make you understand?" Let me show you the ways that ambiguity is created and ways it could be untangled.

Competing Meanings

The narrator employs similar ambiguity in describing persons and conversations. Not all of the inverted meanings are created by antagonists. Though Isabella and John Thorpe continually dispense inaccuracies and untruthful statements, Eleanor and Henry Tilney also obscure meaning and hide truth, when it is convenient. Even Catherine sometimes says what is expected, rather than what she feels. After her initial meeting with John Thorpe, her brother asks her:

> 'Well, Catherine, how do you like my friend Thorpe?' Instead of answering as she probably would have done, had there been no friendship and no flattery in the case, 'I do not like him at all;' she directly replied, 'I like him very much; he seems very agreeable." (NA 33)

The rationale for Catherine's tactful choice of answers is implied. She understands it would be impolite to criticize her brother's friend. Consequently, what she says is

opposite to what she feels. Readers identify with her use of tact but realize as well that what is spoken by all of the characters often hides what is felt.

Besides the discrepant words in dialog, readers are challenged to distill meaning from many of the narrator's choice of words. When describing his daughter, Mr. Morland comments, "Catherine grows quite a good-looking girl—she is *almost* pretty to day" (NA 6). This is a strange compliment and one which reflects on Catherine's tomboy past and the changes that have occurred in her over the past two years. The narrator comments:

> [These] were words which caught [Catherine's] ears now and then; and how welcome were the sounds! To look *almost* pretty, is an acquisition of higher delight to a girl who has been looking plain the first fifteen years of her life, than a beauty from her cradle can ever receive. (NA 6)

The narrator causes readers to sort the differences in the meaning of "almost pretty" as spoken by the father and as assimilated by the daughter. Is she beautiful? Heroines in adventure novels need to be beautiful. Catherine is only *almost pretty*. Does that make her almost a heroine? The narrator allows readers to make the choices between what is spoken and what is implied. Subsequently, the narrator explains that Morland's neighbors were all quite ordinary people without personal mysteries or secretly adopted children. About this circumstance, the narrator chafes, "But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the *perverseness* of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her" (8). The parody on gothic novels is fully deployed in these early descriptions of Catherine and her prospects of becoming the heroine. The word play substitutes the word *perverseness* for ordinary—by being ordinary, her neighbors are ruining Catherine's chances at becoming a heroine in this story. About the journey to Bath, the narrator relates with evident parodic humor, "Neither robbers not tempests *befriended* them, nor one *lucky* overturn to introduce them to the hero" (NA 10). *Robbery* and *tempests* are rarely considered friendly events, and

overturning a carriage is not a lucky happening, except in romances and gothic novels. While the substituted words for *assailed* and *unlucky* create humor and enhance the uncertainty about the genre of this novel, they also signal the tone as witty and playful and encourage reader attention to the meanings enclosed in the humor.

Competing Conceptions of Friendship

The most significant instance of ambiguity in the novel is the multilayered character of *friends* whom Catherine meets. Much of what we know about these friends comes from what they say, but for most of the characters, readers are able to compare what characters say with what they do. The narrator does not explicitly identify good or bad people, reliable or unreliable characters; that is work Catherine and readers must do.

Catherine proves capable of exercising accurate reading of persons in some instances. She realizes immediately that she dislikes John Thorpe. This creates an important crisis that she must negotiate. John is Isabella's brother, and Isabella has declared herself to be Catherine's best friend. John also seems to be her brother's best friend. How can she dislike a person who is a friend of both families? The narrator carefully describes Catherine's internal struggle:

> Little as Catherine was in the habit of judging for herself, and unfixed as were her general notions of how men ought to be, she could not entirely repress a doubt, while she bore with the effusions of his endless conceit, of his being altogether completely agreeable. It was a bold surmise, for he was Isabella's brother; and she had been assured by James, that his manners would recommend him to all her sex; but in spite of this, the extreme weariness of his company, which crept over her before they had been out an hour, and which continued unceasingly to increase till they stopped in Pulteney street again, induced her, in some degree, to resist such high authority, and to distrust his powers of giving universal pleasure. (47)

This is an important advancement in Catherine's reading of people; she is learning to

"resist such high authority," when she determines that *her* judgment is more valid. The reader increasingly understands that, while Catherine is relatively inexperienced, she is neither simple nor foolish. Many of her judgments are accurate and she is willing to endure censure, when she feels she is right.

When Catherine meets Isabella Thorpe, Isabella declares, "There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. I have no notion of loving people by halves, it is not my nature. My attachments are always excessively strong" (NA 25). Isabella and Catherine become close friends. They read and discuss novels together; they take the waters in Bath together and share companionship with one another's brothers, leading to possible romantic involvement. Are these two women then good friends? At one of the balls, Isabella abandons Catherine, so she can dance with James Morland. The narrator explains that after several dances, "Catherine found her arm gently seized by her faithful Isabella" (NA 38). The sense of the narrative begins to reveal that Isabella is primarily concerned with her own priorities and that she is often inconsiderate of Catherine. The narrator, however, at the same time calls her "the faithful Isabella." Even a first-time reader of this novel realizes the irony between the narrator's playful presentation of Isabella's declarations and her opposite actions. Eventually, Catherine recognizes the variations in Isabella's character. Mathison emphasizes the derivative lesson that Catherine gains: "Catherine's experiences show her that people need not be what they seem, that Isabella, who had formerly dazzled her, is actually "ungenerous and selfish, regardless of every thing but her own gratification" (145).

Another of the ambiguous characters that Catherine must decipher is her intended chaperone and social guide, Mrs. Allen. By attaching Mrs. Allen to Catherine at Bath,

Austen creates the "motherless" condition experienced by heroines in romances. Mrs. Allen, through her inattentiveness, self-centeredness and failure to comprehend the importance of her responsibility for Catherine, becomes absent in Catherine's affairs, at a time when Catherine, like the proverbial hare, needs at least one reliable friend. Fortunately, Catherine accurately estimates Mrs. Allen's unreliability and inattention and learns not to depend on her judgment. In this conversation, Catherine asks Mrs. Allen about information that Mrs. Hughes had shared about the Tilney family:

> 'And what did she tell you of them?'
> 'Oh! A vast deal indeed; she hardly talked of anything else.'
> 'Did she tell you what part of Gloucestershire they come from?'
> 'Yes, she did; but I cannot recollect now.'
> 'And are Mr. and Mrs. Tilney in Bath?'
> 'Yes, I fancy they are, but I am not quite certain. Upon recollection, however, I have a notion they are both dead, at least the mother is; yes, I am sure.'
> 'And is Mr. Tilney, my partner, the only son?'
> 'I cannot be quite positive about that, my dear; I have some idea he is.'
> Catherine inquired no further; she had heard enough to feel that Mrs. Allen had no real intelligence to give. (48)

The last sentence employs another of Austen's clever word plays. "Mrs. Allen had *no real intelligence*." This description serves as both a local summary about this conversation, but for Catherine, it is also an extended summary about Mrs. Allen's limited utility as a source of information and guidance. These challenges to understanding located in words and actions develop Catherine's reasoning and force her to make more decisions on her own. In most ambiguous situations in Bath, she succeeds in locating truth from among the several competing alternatives. Only her final opinions of Isabella and General Tilney are yet to be determined. Progress is evident to the reader and in the reader. After her initial tests in Bath, Austen assigns her heroine a more difficult final exam at Northanger Abbey. Why was this book eventually titled

Northanger Abbey? Except for Mansfield Park, her other titles are character traits or names of heroines. In this novel, the most important test—a moment of improved awareness—occurs at Northanger Abbey. It is the place of Catherine's greatest success—or her greatest failure.

Dénouement at Northanger Abbey?

Catherine's reading of gothic novels creates an imaginary expectation of Northanger Abbey, but her misreading of that place is augmented by Henry Tilney's playful narrative. While in route to his home, he suggests that it might be haunted and that it has a mysterious history similar to those in gothic novels. If Catherine is a gullible reader in this case, it is primarily because she does not comprehend that Henry Tilney's comments are intended to (torment) tease her rather than inform her. Catherine cannot comprehend that Henry is laughing at her and is inventing a description that tugs at her too-active imagination. Claudia Johnson describes Catherine's deception thus:

> Indeed, the reason Catherine assents to ludicrously dark surmises about the cabinet is not that her imagination is inflamed with *Radcliffean* excesses, but rather that she trusts Henry's authority as a sensible man, and does not suspect that he, like John Thorpe, but with much more charm, would impose on her credulity in order to amuse himself. (39)

Once Catherine settles into her room at Northanger Abbey, she realizes that the Abbey does not match the descriptions suggested by gothic novels or by Henry. Left to her own judgment and her improving analytical skills, she might not have continued imagining gothic novels as appropriate overlays for prosaic life. Her response to Henry's teasing demonstrate that she does not connect descriptions in gothic novels to Northanger Abbey. Henry asks, "You have formed a very favourable idea of the abbey?" "To be sure I have. Is not it a fine old place, just like what one reads about" (114)? Henry then conflates

descriptions from gothic novels with his own home. Catherine's responses here are important indicators of her increasing discernment. "Oh! But this will not happen to me, I am sure." "Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful—this is just like a book!—But it cannot really happen to me" (NA 115). She demonstrates excitement and fear while listening to Henry's narrative but also distances his representation as "like a book," not as an accurate description of Northanger Abbey. The narrator summarizes, "Catherine, recollecting herself, grew ashamed of her eagerness, and began earnestly to assure him that her attention had been fixed with the smallest apprehension of really meeting with what he related" (NA 117). She is able to distinguish between fiction and reality and begins to understand the interplay between the two.

Austen injects a frightening storm and places a large locked chest in Catherine's room that can be examined, borrowing the tropes of *Udolpho*. Both of these cause moments of distress for Catherine. Ultimately, every aspect of the abbey, its inhabitants and its accommodations, prove it to be a delightful home not a dangerous castle. "How glad I am that Northanger is what it is! If it had been like some other places, I do not know that, in such night as this I could have answered for my courage:—but now, to be sure there is nothing to alarm one" (NA 122). Catherine passes part one of her final exam. Austen demonstrates that her heroine is able to sort fiction and fact. At the same time, employing her ever present irony, she declares the abbey a safe place—"there is nothing to alarm one." Readers suspect this might not be entirely true. Part two of her final exam is to comprehend the full dimensions of General Tilney's character. This is an activity that has begun and is in process. I contend that Henry interrupts Catherine's investigation of Mrs. Tilney's bedroom before Catherine has gathered all of the facts concerning the

nature of Mrs. Tilney's seclusion and untimely death, as well as General Tilney's involvement. In every clue about the General that the narrator offers, Catherine sees similarities with the fictional Montoni.[55] The General does not like the picture of his deceased wife. The bedroom in which she died is locked against visitors. Catherine, like a good detective, is looking inside and accumulating evidence to support her theory. The narrator explains, "Catherine sometimes started at the boldness of her own surmises, and sometimes hoped and feared that she had gone too far; but they were supported by such appearances as made their dismissal impossible" (NA 139). Her discoveries make "Their dismissal impossible" for Catherine…and for the reader. As in all good detective stories, the narrator reveals enough evidence to lead readers to supportable but incorrect conclusions. If Catherine is deceived by incomplete evidence, so is the reader.

Henry's discovery of Catherine's detective work and suspicions prompt him to correct—more *tormenting*—Catherine. The basis of his argument is similar to one in the early chapters of the novel—public opinion argues against your supposition. The bad things you suspect don't happen in England; they occur only in fiction or in primitive countries. This is the moment of greatest irony in the novel. What seems like a final statement on the improbability of Catherine's suspicions is only a prelude to the revelation of General Tilney's imminent cruelty. Henry's dominant voice of rationality ultimately proves as unreliable as that of other characters. Catherine and the reader have pieced together enough clues to believe that General Tilney is capable of cruelty. Henry only contends on the basis of a single act that his father had not done. Here *he* becomes the poor reader and inaccurate judge of his father's intentions and capacity for cruelty.

[55] Montoni is the primary male villain in Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

By the end of the novel, the narrator validates Catherine's suspicions and reveals that she *and the reader* were deceived by Henry's bluster about civilized England and benign fathers. "Catherine, at any rate, heard enough to feel, that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (NA 183). The narrator explains that, "[Henry] blushed for the narrow-minded counsel which he was obliged to expose" (Ibid). This is another of Austen's powerful ironies worked out in the events of the novel. The context indicates he was blushing over his father's "narrow-minded counsel." The reader wonders—is Henry also be blushing for his own injudicious declaration?

Pass or fail? Does Catherine earn a passing grade? Austen's project is to show progress, not perfection in her heroine. Catherine accuses herself of several follies, some related to application of fictional texts, some a result of her own desire to be frightened and some from being naïve. However, she recognizes her errors, their sources and ways to make better judgments. She learns from her experiences and realizes that all systems of knowing contain threads of ambiguity. The narrator reveals Catherine's enlightened thinking. She sees that society encompasses multiple possibilities of variable behavior:

> There was a general, though unequal, mixture of good and bad…she would not be surprised if even in Henry and Eleanor Tilney, some slight imperfection might hereafter appear…upon this conviction she need not fear to acknowledge some actual specks in the character of their father, who, though cleared from the grossly injurious suspicions which she must ever blush to have entertained, she did believe upon *serious consideration*, to be not perfectly amiable. (NA 147)

This is the important climax for Austen's heroine. By *reasoning* and *reflection* upon her experiences, Catherine is increasingly able to make accurate assessments. She is no longer subject entirely to the power of fiction, the authority of other interlocutors or the

imprecision of public opinion. She realizes that the patriarchal voice of authority is not always reliable. Finally, she understands that every character presents a mixture of good and bad. She achieves independence of thought and becomes her own best counsel. The narrator emphasizes, "Her mind made up on these several points, and her resolution formed, of always judging and acting in future with the greatest good sense" (Ibid). She will of course make some erroneous judgements in the future. That is the dynamic reality of her social milieu. Her resolution, however, signifies notable progress in her self-reliance and subjective development. Mathison comments, "[She now can] discriminate: not all people even in a nice family need be nice. She begins gradually to see people as they are, not as they are officially classified in society, and to frame her own standards of human merit" (143).

Conclusions

Austen challenges Johnson's conceptions of young women's rational weakness and sympathetic excesses. She argues that there are no predetermined and gender-specific factors that affect reader response. In *Northanger Abbey*, she critiques unsophisticated reading. If there is a weakness in Catherine's processes, it is that she does not seek advice or counsel of others when formulating ideas. It is this kind of isolated ideation that eventually causes her embarrassment over her conclusions about the undiscovered "crimes" of General Tilney. If she had asked a few more questions, if she had tried out her theory on a few others, she might have discovered the true and false components. In fairness to Catherine, she is not entirely wrong about the General's character or about his treatment of Mrs. Tilney. Additionally, when she makes a singular mistake in judgment,

she adjusts her own decision-making processes and improves her ability to prevent repeat occurrences. Fleishman describes Catherine's transformation in this way:

> The heroine moves from an unformulated openness to experience, through a naïve notion of the direct application of symbols (like those of the Gothic novels) to a more sophisticated use of cultural forms—which she treats no longer literally but metaphorically. When the heroine becomes aware that a literary convention does not predict or determine the behavior of those to whom is superficially applies—and yet it may be taken as a useful metaphoric construct by which to shape one's response to them, as Catherine does with regard to General Tilney—she sees through the artificiality of all cultural symbols and yet remains an active and skillful participant in their processes. (36)

In this novel, Austen introduces a view of reading that accounts for multiple, competing inputs and points to the complex variability of human nature. She critiques the prior simplistic, cause-and-effect assessments of novel reading. She demonstrates the several possible outcomes from reading, and argues that the normal expectation for young readers who are centered in a supportive and interacting communities is one of incremental education and self-development. By the end of the novel, Catherine becomes wiser about the effects of reading fiction; she also learns that reality can be as threatening as any described in novels. Isabella shocks Catherine by telling her that she has broken the engagement with James Morland, and has attached herself to Captain Tilney. Only a few pages later, Colonel Tilney demonstrates his capacity for cruelty when he ejects Catherine from his home—with no notice, no explanation and no escort. Austen points to recognizable, credible events and to people who have the ability to act as tyrants in a civilized country. While she mocks readers who have participated eagerly in the gothic adventure, she reminds them that there are real threats to a young woman's life, which warrant similar interest and sympathies. Austen joins with the several past and future authors who suggest that there is benefit to be derived from reading fiction; not by

applying texts as an overlay which dictate imitative behavior, but by using them to train readers in identifying ambiguity and pointing to strategies for negotiating it successfully.

Appendix

FABLES BY GAY - # 50

The Hare and Many Friends

Friendship, like love, is but a name,
Unless to one you stint the flame.
The child whom many fathers share,
Hath seldom known a father's care;
"Tis thus in friendships; who depend
On many, rarely find a friend.

A hare, who in a civil way,
Complied with ev'ry thing, like Gay,
Was known by all the bestial train
Who haunt the wood or graze the plain.
Her care was never to offend;
And ev'ry creature was her friend.

As forth she went at early dawn,
To taste the dew-besprinkled lawn,
Behind she hears the hunter's cries,
And from the deep-mouth'd thunder flies.
She starts, she stops, she pants for breath;
She hears the near advance of death;
She doubles to mislead the hound,
And measures back her mazy round;
Till, fainting in the publick way,
Half dead with fear she gasping lay.

What transport in her bosom grew,
When first the hose appear'd in view!
Let me, says she, your back ascend,
And owe my safety to a friend.
You know my feet betray my flight;
To friendship ev'ry burden's light.

The horse replied, poor honest puss,
It grieves my ear to see thee thus.
Be comforted, relief is near;
For all your friends are in the rear.

She next the stately bull implor'd;
And thus replied the mighty lord:
Since ev'ry beast alive can tell

That I sincerely wish you well,
I may, without offence, pretend
To take the freedom of a friend:
Love calls me hence; a fav'rite cow
Expects me near yon barley-mow;
And when a lady's in the case,
You know all other things give place.
To leave you thus might seem unkind;
But see, the goat is just behind.

The goat remark'd her pulse was high,
Her languid head, her heavy eye.
My back, says he, may do you harm;
The sheep's at hand, and wool is warm.

The sheep was feeble, and complain'd
His sides a load of wool sustain'd:
Said he was slow, confess'd his fears;
For hounds eat sheep as well as hares.

She now the trotting calf address'd,
To save from death a friend distress'd,
Shall I, says he, of tender age,
In this important care engage?
Older and abler pass'd you by:
How strong are those! How weak am I!
Should I presume to bear you hence,
Those friends of mine may take offence.
Excuse me then, you know my heart;
But dearest friends, alas must part.

How shall we all lament! Adieu:
For see the hounds are just in view.

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CHAPTER 5

SCOTCH NOVEL READING: REALITY'S LIMITS ON IMAGINATIVE READING

Introduction

Sarah Green's *Scotch Novel Reading* (1824) is about a young female heroine, Alice Fennel, who is a mild quixote. According to April Alliston, *quixotism* in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels is, "An imbalance of reading, an over-identification insufficiently tempered by judgments of probability, which only fiction was seen as inviting and which only the novel could represent" (255). This is an apt description of Alice's reading and over-identification. Alice is the least quixotic of the four female heroines I examine in this dissertation. While she admires the female characters in Sir Walter Scott's novels that are set in Scotland, her enthusiasm for all things Scottish is better described as a fetish—or even as mild an activity as a hobby.[56] Her reading stimulates a desire in her to dress, speak and be thought of as a Scottish lass; she prepares for this role in three ways—she tries to adopt an authentic Scottish brogue, wears highland tartans and, most importantly, declares that she will only marry a Scottish hero who matches or exceeds Rob Roy's mythical martial fame.[57] Dr. Fennel, Alice's

[56] The Oxford American Dictionary and Thesaurus defines "fetish" as a thing evoking irrational devotion or respect. p. 537

[57] Rob Roy MacGregor is the fictional outlaw warrior featured in the 1817 novel of the same name. The historical novel centers its interest in the first Jacobite rebellion of 1715.

father, is less concerned with the brogue and wardrobe; her intention to marry a Scottish warrior-hero is of greater concern. The tensions and resolution in this novel are centered in Dr. Fennel's attempts to reduce Scottish novel reading's effect on his daughter and his secretive actions to arrange a marriage to an English gentleman of *his* choosing.

One of Sarah Green's central projects in this, her final novel, is to demonstrate the novel's weakness in permanently overwriting imaginary narratives in a reader's mind. She contends that temporary identification caused by romantic novels is eventually diminished by the reader comparing imagined figures with real ones. Her novel acts simultaneously as a variation of the Quixote trope and an argument against the supposed danger of quixotic reading. The cure for Alice's love of all things Scottish is for her to simply meet real, prosaic Scottish people. These real exemplars include Lady McBane, her daughter, Margaret McBane and Lady McBane's ward, Sandy, who is her sister's illegitimate son. Another realistic Scot whom Alice meets at a ball is a Scottish officer, McDougal, who impresses Alice as being very ordinary. Finally, she meets Duncan MacGregor, a Scottish warrior and purportedly a descendant of Rob Roy. Confronted with such nonglamorous Scottish people, the fictional images lose power over Alice.

Upon meeting the extremely ordinary and unkempt Lady McBane, Alice reflects, "This Scotch lady [is] very different from the heroines of [my] favourite novel-writer, and indeed to everything her glowing fancy had drawn of living Scotch beauties" (173). At the conclusion of their first accidental meeting, the narrator explains, "While her father was carefully watching her [Alice's] expressive countenance and movements, she slowly slipped off her tartan scarf, and threw it on one side, with a considerable degree of vexation" (174). Alice's attachment to Scotch clothing proves to be a mild one. When she

realizes that not all Scottish people are as lovely and erudite as Scott describes them in his novels, she easily begins to diminish her affection for fictional characters. In this act, Green foreshadows Alice's eventual abandonment of her imitated brogue. Choosing to cease speaking in a Scottish dialect is easy reversal, but changing her desire to marry a Scottish hero informs the vicissitudes of three narrative volumes. The process of comparing characters from the novels with real people she encounters performs a formative function in Alice, transforming her into a sophisticated reader of novels and people. Her greatest increased awareness is the realization that outward representations of people are incomplete. Green, like Austen before her, demonstrates that one benefit of novel reading is the mental maturation of the young female reader.

Dangerous, Disruptive or Developmental?

Scotch Novel Reading relates the romantic narrative of a young girl entering society and points to reading practices and their effects on women's sophistication and maturation. I argue that, like Lennox, Edgeworth and Austen, Green disputes the negative estimations of reading's effects on susceptible women. She employs her novel, in ways similar to the other authors I have analyzed, to demonstrate that novel reading and adoption of temporary fictional ideas as overlays for life prove to be developmental for Alice—not dangerous. Jacqueline Pearson suggests, "Female novel-reading may have seemed to some timid or misogynist commentators a 'dangerous recreation,' but it also gave women writers a series of potent images to deal with their anxieties about, or even to fight for their rights to, literary authority" (218). Green shows that while Alice's reading of Scotch novels are mildly disruptive of what others consider a normal life, they are not dangerous, they are not permanent and they lead to instruction—not destruction.

Like Austen, Green critiques others' conceptions of the novel's influence, and especially Samuel Johnson's. Green skillfully separates the few statements in *Rambler No. 4* that she supports from the parts of Johnson's arguments that she refutes. She demonstrates this differential analysis in the way she constructs Alice's adventures and conversations. I analyze in this chapter Green's contribution to and advancement of the ideas about novels and reading that Lennox, Edgeworth and Austen have previously debated. I identify Green's original, specific argument, that real experiences effectually buffer imaginary conceptions created in young readers by fiction. After she understands that her Scotch novels have glamorized and overstated the representations of character and beauty, Alice abandons her imitation of those external features. Yet, like Arabella in *The Female Quixote,* she learns about aspects of character presented in the Scotch novels, and these representations help her to observe family members, acquaintances and suitors with more precision. Johnson suggests that "Novels are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, [and] they are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions, not fixed by principles…not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account" (156). Green creates her heroine, Alice Fennel, as the embodiment of this part of Johnson's portrayal. She is young, impressionable and lacks any broader experience than that of her close family. Consequently, as she reads Scott's novels, she has no comparative basis for judging fictionality. She enjoys the imaginary adventures and examples of passionate suitors that she does not experience in her own mundane life.

Deidre Lynch explains, "People's transactions with books came to be connected in new ways, first, to their endeavors to find themselves as 'individuals' and to escape

from their social context" (6). Alice's submission to and application of Scottish fiction is prompted by her antipathy for the local suitors and their lackluster personalities. Reading fiction provides Alice with an adventure world and the hope that there are greater and more interesting exotic men than the uninteresting ones she meets in her prosaic circle of friends. To this extent, Green agrees with and illustrates Johnson's precepts—however, about his proposition that reading novels has the "power to take possession by a kind of violence," Green disagrees (Johnson 157).

In similar ways to her female novelist predecessors, Green employs the characters and dialog in the novel to guide her own readers to a more accurate view of the novel's limited power and she presents for their consideration a more accurate view of intelligent, capable and educated women readers who benefit from imaginative reading. Green shows in Alice's willing submission to and in her subsequent reasoned departure from her imaginary world that Johnson's early assessment of fiction's power is overstated. Alice's relationship with fiction is never coercive. Specifically, Green pictures Alice's ability to sort fiction from reality as the central argument of *Scotch Novel Reading*. Green shows that a young reader's imaginary world is eventually mitigated and then integrated into her own understanding. Green embraces the educational benefit of novel reading and points to the potential formative value.

The chapters in the novel in which Alice speaks with the heroic but grievously wounded Duncan MacGregor are the critical center of the novel. MacGregor is the embodiment of a mythic Scotch hero. He is part true history and part imaginative romantic figure—part reasonable and true, part an exaggerated image. While he exudes a powerful warrior's image, he is also so horribly wounded—missing various body parts

and pieces in almost every quarter—that he quickly becomes repellant to Alice. After MacGregor's first appearance, Green employs free indirect discourse—someone is observing; the reader is unsure who—to re-evaluate fictional heroes. "Oh, how charming descriptions read in books of warlike Gallic chiefs! See them in reality, and they scarce appear a degree above barbarians" (Vol. III, 75). However, as Alice learns more about MacGregor, she discovers his inner qualities of honor, kindness, loyalty and intelligence, these admirable traits become more important to her than his scars. Her focus gradually shifts from surface to interior. Concurrently, Alice begins to understand the importance of deeper judgments about novels and people. She realizes there are practice experiences created by reading—books and people—that develop insight and teach skills that help unravel human complexity. She understands eventually that becoming Scottish is not achieved by external imitation—language and wardrobe. Green's contribution to arguments about reading are similar to Austen's in *Northanger Abbey*. It is precisely the nonadjudicated complexity in novels that develops rather than destroys readers—both those in the novel and those who are reading the novel.

A Mild Quixote

Compared to Arabella in *The Female Quixote* and Virginia St. Pierre in *Belinda*, Alice Fennel is only slightly committed to imaginations that emerge from her reading. Like Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, she enjoys the pleasure of reading novels but rarely confuses her own world with the fictional one. Unlike the original Don Quixote, Alice doesn't imagine ordinary objects or persons as disguised creatures from a fabulous world. The extent of Alice's transplanting fictional characters into her own world is that she

assigns Scottish names to the family's servants and once she calls a meal of liver and onions *haggis* (Volume I, 15).

Alice's father and older sister also read fiction and they sometimes allow themselves to be captured momentarily by the immersive entertainment. The narrator explains that Dr. Fennel would, "Unbend his mind with light reading" (Volume I, 24). His choice of books included Miss Burney and Mrs. Radcliffe. However, "Wearied with the trash of more insignificant bards who dealt in fictitious lore, he seriously resolved on real domestic happiness, by taking a wife" (Ibid). Dr. Fennel creates an image of the perfect wife through his reading of romance novels. "The perfect Mrs. Fennel, therefore, whom he had never yet seen, except in imagination, or rather calculation, should be of an agreeable countenance…and well read, but not *too* learned" (Volume I, 25). Dr. Fennel wants to destroy the "romantic disposition which his daughters had inherited from their mother" (Volume I, 33). However, he models similar imaginary delights that sometime permeate his real world. The narrator remarks, "Indeed none of us know ourselves, Mr. Fennel himself was not without a strong portion of the romantic in his own temperament, however he might laugh at the enthusiastic flights of fancy in many a 'romance writer and romance reader'" (33). The primary reason Dr. Fennel does not enforce a prohibition against Scottish novels is that he has experienced similar enjoyment reading British novels. The same imaginary enjoyment that now stirs his younger daughter, and he does not want to deprive her of the same reading enjoyment that he experiences.

Joanna Gavins suggests that reader imagination interacting with fictional texts is a pleasure to be expected and it is a nearly universal occurrence. "The feeling of being so immersed in a text-world as almost to lose sense of who and where we are is familiar to

just about anyone who has ever read a novel" (Bray 146). Rita Felski comments on this condition of being caught up in reading:

> In one possible scenario—what we might call the Madame Bovary syndrome—a reader's self-awareness is swallowed up by her intense affiliation with an imaginary persona, an affiliation that involves a temporary relinquishing of reflective and analytical consciousness. Readerly attachment takes the form of a cathexis onto idealized figures who are often treasured for their very remoteness and distance, for facilitating an escape or release from one's everyday existence. It is their very dissimilarity that is the source of their desirability. Immersed in the virtual reality of fictional text, a reader feels herself to be transported, caught up or swept away. (34)

Felski emphasizes the pleasure and utility of this kind of response. Her explanation that dissimilarity between reader and model is one of the conditions creates the pleasure accurately describes Alice's reading. Alice has never visited Scotland nor met a Scotch man or woman. To Alice, Scotland is an exotic and exciting place. Scott's descriptions of the glamorous highland countryside and culture are a source of escape and release for Alice that she enjoys. A much older version of Joanna Gavin's universal quixotism assessment is offered by Richard Graves in his "Essay on Quixotism" (1772).[58]

Graves suggests that the natural desire to imitate another is both pleasurable and harmless:

> But there is another species, or rather a slighter degree of quixotism, which proceeds merely from the mimetic disposition of mankind, and is, perhaps more common in the world than is generally imagined; what I mean is, a desire of imitating any great personage whom we read of in history, in their dress, their manner of life, their most indifferent actions, or their most trifling peculiarities…and there are few people, I believe, so severely rational, as not to have some slight tincture of this harmless frailty, or, as the wise men of the world would call it, this ridiculous affectation. (43)

[58] This essay is Chapter IV of Richard Graves' romance tale, *The Spiritual Quixote – or, the Summer's Ramble of Mr. Geoffry Wildgoose*.

These descriptions provide a precise description of Alice Fennel's appropriation of Scott's novels. Alice is never deluded enough to think that she actually *is* one of the Scottish characters. She doesn't for instance change her own name for a Scottish one; she only applies Scottish names to the servants. She clearly realizes that her father and sister do not appreciate her attempts to speak with a Scottish vocabulary and accent. The narrator summarizes Alice's reading interests and consequent relational difficulties:

> Alice Fennel, therefore, continued to read on what she could not understand one half of—to be half in love with every Scotch author—to fancy herself the Scotch heroine of every Scotch tale—to affect a queer kind of jargon and pronunciation, which she thought was the true Scotch dialect, and, like a persecuted heroine, to endure the laughter of her sister and her brother-in-law, and the frequent and severe reprimands of her father. (Volume I, 37)

The narrator also admits that Alice can easily set aside both Scottish dialect and dress as she determines appropriate to the group of interlocutors. With her own sister and brother-in-law, as well as with her god-mother, Alice sounds and acts like the Londoner that she is. However, around suitors and female competitors, she employs the dress and dialect of Scott's characters. She uses these devices and her aspiration to marry a Scotch hero as an apparatus to discourage English suitors. Green creates a new species of quixotism—one that is self-aware, conditional and alternately employed and set aside by her heroine as varying circumstances suggest. Clearly, Alice controls her quixotism, not the reverse.

Alice's Adventures in Romance-land

Dr. Fennel expects that Alice will grow out of her affection for Scott's novels and her own artifice. Her elder sister, Elizabeth, had, "Gone raving mad after lord Byron and his poetry. Thank Heaven, her husband has cured her" (Volume I, 1). Dr. Fennel assumes that time and marriage will replace her imaginary relationships—as it had for both he and

his older daughter, Elizabeth. However, Alice's recovery and cure are impeded by an almost endless cast of other poor readers and romantic dilettantes. Alice's close relatives and friends are more severely hobbled by their romantic notions and poor reading practices than is Alice.

Is There a Good Reader in this Novel?

Green populates the several hundred pages of *Scotch Novel Reading* with a cast of romantic readers and caroms them through many unlikely circumstances. Alice's admiration for all things Scottish is the least of the romantic deficiencies that disturb and disrupt the other characters. Many of the bad readers in the novel are men. Some are older men and women—those categories of humans that Johnson is not worried about, because he thinks they make better judgments. The complication for Alice—and for Green's readers—is to find one *normal* character who might model sophisticated and disinterested reading for Alice. Alice and Green's readers are forced to separate reliable from unreliable sources. They must also decipher many mysterious events and hidden relationships that the narrator obscures from the reader.

Dr. Fennel's great concern is with the "quackery" that exists in many professions (Volume I, 1). It distresses him that, "The town was crazy after patent medicines, and all kind of quackery…it was every man his own physician" (Volume I, 20)! He realizes there are various kinds of quackery including artists who flatter their patrons with portraits that do not accurately portray. His diatribe against kinds of quacks includes clergy, actors and writers. Dr. Fennel suggests, "Authors, as they call themselves, often mere book-makers, bore one to death with their quackery" (22). The doctor suggests that there are reputable authors who know how to write and pick appropriate subjects, and

there are quacks—those who imitate real authors—whose interests in writing are primarily pecuniary.

Sarah Green employs Dr. Fennel's sensitivity against quack literature to explore the nature of novels and their effects and forces readers to evaluate her own novel. Like her predecessor authors, Green rewards close and thoughtful reading. Her training of good readers begins on the title page. The complete title of this novel is *Scotch Novel Reading; or, Modern Quackery, A Novel Really Founded on Facts*. Does Green humorously imply that *her* novel is "Modern Quackery?" What does it mean that the novel is "*Really* Founded on Facts?" The undeterminability of words and their usage within phrases, even in the title, forces readers to synthesize their own understanding of meanings—ones that the narrator and characters alternately challenge or support. Perhaps the greatest challenge for Green's readers is to determine what kind of a book hers is. Is it a romance, a novel or a combination of both?

Jacqueline Pearson describes this tension and eventual amalgamation of genres:

> Many commentators, especially early in the period, vigorously distinguished between the romance and its 'younger Sister' the novel. Novels 'are meant to represent beings like ourselves, and the probable incidents of human life', whereas romance 'describes what never happened nor is likely to happen'. The language and structure of the two were different, with the 'lofty and elevated' language of romance contrasted with the novel's language of everyday reality, and the 'detached and independent adventures' of romance with the 'Unity of design' of the novel. Such distinctions, however, are only useful up to a point, and tend to collapse later in the period under the weight of the Gothic novel, sometimes seen as a hybrid of novel and romance. (Pearson 198-9)

While *Scotch Novel Reading* is not a Gothic novel, it blurs between probable and unlikely events and between a fairy tale and historical narrative. Incrementally, the characters and events suggest that this novel could not possibly be "founded on *facts*," even if the author

states that it "really" is. Among the least stable and most unreliable words in the novel are those of the author and narrator. In the same way that Lennox employs chapter titles to engage and improve readers, Green creates an active and self-reflexive narrator who points to subjects that readers should think about. Half way through the 600+ page narrative, the narrator suggests that more skeptical interrogation of the narrator's reliability would have been something readers *should* have practiced:

> Miss Underwood had an occasion of a private conference with mamma; what she told her we cannot profess to say, though we profess to know many things, which, I [admit], are enough to make our readers exclaim—"How came the writer of this history to know all this?" (Volume II, 162)

The narrator criticizes her own narration asking how a narrator can know all the facts of every private conversation and the details of actions at every location, given that some of the events happen at the same time at locations in different countries. Green examines within the novel the reasonability of an omniscient narrator and points to features of fiction and compares them to attributes of histories.

Green's narrator receive assistance in analyzing novels from one of the fictional characters in the novel, Mrs. Hannah Meredith. Mrs. Hannah, as the text refers to her, is a spinster and a reader/philosopher, not unlike the Countess in *The Female Quixote*. Alice Fennel visits her home and they discuss novels, poetry, history and how to read effectively—not affectively. About Scott's novels, Mrs. Hannah remarks:

> I hope he did not write them; he is too charming a poet, too excellent a writer, to waste his own time, and other people's money, to pen so many novels, all full of improbabilities, and some not without historical errors. Historical novels and romances are bad things; the man of strong literary power should abjure them altogether. They are sure to give a false notion of history that leads the mind astray, and makes the young and undiscerning eagerly search after the marvelous, while they are careless of the truths of history. (Volume II, 186-7)

Mrs. Hannah critiques not only novels but also methods of reading. She tells Alice, "You are all for the romantic; you look not for the solid and intrinsic merit of an author" (Volume II, 193). She also critiques the practice of adopting the Scottish brogue:

> An English person trying to imitate them, is a kind of insulting mimicry; and though such mimicry may proceed from admiration, it only makes the imitator laughed at…I am happy this is not true of you. (Vol. II, 195)

This compliment is ironic. Alice chose not to practice her Scottish dialect in conversation with Mrs. Hannah. The narrator concludes, "The lectures of Mrs. Hannah Meredith had done her no good" (Ibid). As with her fictional reading sisters—Arabella, Virginia St. Pierre and Catherine Morland—Alice requires more than lectures and objective reasoning to alter her reading and imitative practices. Her cure proceeds instead from her own life experiences, specifically her reading experiences and in her comparison of the characters in novels with real characters she encounters in London.

A Cast of Romantic Characters

Alice is not alone in her romantic notions about life and love. Pearson comments, "Misreading, indeed, runs in the Fennel family. Alice's sister Elizabeth suffered from a severe case of 'Byromania' in youth but was 'cured' by marriage and motherhood" (215). Alice's godmother, Alice Deaconsfield, was supposed to leave her god-daughter a substantial inheritance upon her death. However, she is romanced at age 59 by a 25-year-old charlatan and marries him. The narrator explains:

> [Alice Deaconsfield] had always been very fond of novel reading; and though she had never been in love sufficiently to make her give her hand in marriage to any one, yet she would often sigh over the adventures of distressed lovers and wished that Heaven had bestowed on her such a man as was described in these tales of fiction—in which tales indeed that species of phoenix is only to be found. (Volume I, 160-1)

The deceiver, Thomas Jenkins, "Had, however, received many instructions in the art of feigning passions, in repeating love passages from plays" (163). These he uses to sway the impassioned spinster. The narrator again explains, "Tom was as fond of reading plays, as his mistress was of perusing novels" (Ibid). Together they imagine they are in love, prompted by their reading and misreading of novels and plays. Even the romantic Dr. Fennel and his equally romantic daughter comprehend the seemingly evident deception enacted on the gullible and romantic Alice Deaconsfield. This event heightens Dr. Fennel's and Green's readers' awareness of the danger of a similar outcome for Alice. If an older woman can be softened by her fiction reading to the extent she cannot determine artifice in a suitor half her age, what hope is there for Alice to escape a similar fate from an equally pragmatic Scotch hero who schemes to obtain her hand in marriage and her large dowry? This narrative is another in which Green challenges Johnson's assumptions—that it is primarily the young that are deceived by their reading.

Equally romantic is the entire Butler family, the Fennel's closest friends. Mr. Butler wants his son, Robert, to marry Alice so that the Fennel and Butler families will continue the friendship into future generations. When Robert refuses the chosen bride, the ancient Mr. Butler offers *himself* as a suitable substitute husband—a choice that further disgusts Alice. The conflict between Robert and Alice is perpetuated by her love of Scottish fiction and Robert's disdain for *all* fiction. Elizabeth Fennel says she often heard Robert avow his complete disdain for novels, boasting:

> A short tale, ever so well written, in the form of a novel or romance, though with plenty of margin, and in very large print, always so disgusted him, with descriptions and characters that never had existence in real life…he was always obliged to close the book… he thinks he may safely say he never read one novel through in his whole life. (Volume I, 74)

In a subsequent description, the narrator explains that Robert's aversion is taken to an extreme and that he consequently misses the potential benefit of novels:

> He scoffed indeed incessantly at all this nonsense, until, like all others, who indulge in giving way to extremes, he carried it so far as to take a rooted aversion to all fictitious tales—'til at last he would not read any novel, whatever, however good, however instructive, or how truly soever it might depict the real scenes of life, or ably satirize the manner of the fashionable world. (Volume I, 118)

In her critique of Robert as a reader, Green rehabilitates the benefit of novel reading. Like Lennox and Austen, Green points to the significant beneficial applications of novel reading—if they are viewed as exercises in judgment and rational synthesis—that Robert misses. The dénouement between lovers depends on improvement in both of their reading philosophies and practices. They both create fictional overlays of the other person through their misreading of that person and their incomplete understanding of fiction's potential good effects.

A Series of Unlikely Events

Green's and her narrator's believability are severely eroded by the several unlikely and seemingly miraculous events that complicate the narrative. Her claim in the title of the novel that her tale is "Really Founded on Fact" is challenged by a number of implausible if not completely unbelievable conditions and descriptions. Borrowing from the Pygmalion trope, Green explains that Robert Butler has fallen hopelessly in love with a young woman he has seen only in a painting. Further complicating that attraction is the fact that the portrait depicts the girl sleeping—her eyes are closed. Since he cannot see her eyes, he supposes the girl may be blind. When he begins his quixotic quest for the original of the portrait, he can never be sure of his judgment about candidates, since he

cannot compare their eyes with the girl in the painting nor judge their active appearance, since they are awake, while the beloved in the portrait is peacefully sleeping. It is Robert who becomes the fully-represented quixote in this novel—not Alice. The narrator chides, "Oh, Robert, Robert, laugh not at those who fancy these things! Thou are more absurd than they" (Volume I, 118).

Further complicating the plot, Mr. Fennel and Alice, while vacationing in the countryside, are trapped in a fire that threatens their cottage and their lives. The narrator creates a fairy tale narrative of the events surrounding this crisis:

> As Robert was passing through a pleasant village, or rather a small town…he saw a thick smoke issuing from a small cottage, the inhabitants of which he judged, from all outward appearance, must be buried in profound sleep. (Volume III, 15)

A woman in a white night gown cries out, "Oh, sir, whoever you are, help to rescue the sweet girl that lodges there, and her worthy father from the fire that I am sure is about to break out from that dwelling" (Ibid)! Robert rushes in, rescues the girl and her father and carries them both to safety. In the act of opening the girl's bedroom door, "The hitherto-smothered flames burst forth, and their light shone full on, oh Heavens! Robert's long admired *Sleeping Beauty*, sunk in the deep slumber of peaceful innocence" (Volume III, 16)! He sees the girl with her eyes closed and realizes she is the same one in the portrait he had viewed whose eyes were also closed. He identifies her by *not* seeing her eyes!

Reader credulity is stretched to the breaking point in the narration of this event. While Robert is rescuing father and daughter, he *doesn't recognize* them as Mr. Fennel or Alice—too much smoke, perhaps? The unrecognizable father rewards the unrecognized Robert for his heroic service. He gives him a precious locket in which is another smaller version of the sleeping cherub picture. Immediately after the rescue, Robert hurries away

to board a ship and sails to the continent, convinced he will now be able to locate the real girl when he returns and convinced he will never marry anyone except the girl (with the closed eyes) in the picture. An ironic aspect of this situation for the reader is that Alice is the girl in the picture, and though her eyes are usually open, they are *closed* in regard to seeing Robert's potential as a suitor and husband.

Robert supposed the father and daughter in the cottage were "buried in a profound sleep." It turns out that *he* is the only one "asleep" during the incident. Alice *pretends* to be sleeping while being rescued, but peeks momentarily at her rescuer—he misses that singular opportunity to see the girl with her eyes open. *She* realizes it is Robert Butler and falls in love with *him* based on his real "act of singular heroism" (Volume III, 216). The narrator explains:

> Love took his sudden and certain aim, and thence arose, on the part of Alice, that pensiveness, that abjuration of all that was unpleasant or disagreeable to Robert Butler; and even Scotch novel reading, as well as the dialect began to lose its charms. (Volume III, 216-7)

This fabulous fire and rescue scene creates the moment from which some of the narrative tensions begin to be resolved and a number of new ones are created. Ironically and humorously, this critical event is caused by another *dangerous* female reader. The narrator provides the back-story for the cause of the fire:

> This fire owed its origin to *novel reading*; but not *Scotch* novel reading; no, it was owing to the maid-servant, who was as fond of the marvelous as the young lady-lodger; but she, the maid, loved to read all about *ghostesses*, and *them* kind of things, or an account of what was right *arnest*, a dreadful murder, for the moderate charge of one penny; and in the perusal of the latter work she was engaged in bed, had fallen asleep at the conclusion, without putting out her candle, and it had caught her window-curtains; she did not sleep so sound but that the flame wakened her, and she ran out, screaming for assistance. (Volume III, 215-6)

In a scene that lasts only a few minutes, father, daughter and suitor are brought together

and each is transformed by the cataclysm. Robert realizes now there exists a real sleeping beauty and transfers his passion from a portrait and its miniature to a real woman—though he still does not know who she is. His Galatea comes alive for a moment—then disappears. From a literary perspective, Robert learns that fiction is a mode of representation, which though it is unsubstantial can point to real possibilities. Like Virginia St. Pierre in *Belinda*, he realizes that affection for even the best fictional character can never be as satisfying as that shared with a real human.

Alice's instantaneous alteration functions similarly. Her fictional heroic beloved is displaced by an act of heroism by a real person. She, too, understands that her investment in relationships with imaginary characters, no matter how wonderfully they are portrayed, cannot be as satisfying as a relationship with a real human. The fire scene and subsequent unraveling of its mysteries demands several repetitions of reading from Green's readers. The congested and complicated story line creates one of the beneficial intellectual exercises that Joshua Landy describes. "Formative fictions invite us not to one but to several tests, tests of varying degrees of difficulty, our readiness to meet them steadily increasing as we go" (12). Landy suggests that we cannot understand the whole of the novel without understanding its parts; contrarily, we cannot understand the parts without understanding the whole. He concludes, "The result of this double bind is that we are forced, simply in order to take in each new element we encounter, to form a tentative hypothesis about the totality of the work. In turn, to interpret new elements differently, which elements in turn generate new hypotheses, and so on, and so on" (13). This is a good explanation of how *Scotch Novel Reading* makes readers engage and sort the complexity of people and events. Embedded in the marvelous events and relationships in

this novel there is instructive commentary about the effects of reading and the potential utility of fiction's ability to educate, not by a didactic mode, but by creating an ambiguous narrative that engages readers' creative problem-solving skills.

An Assault on Imagination

The catalyst that ultimately destroys Alice's illusions of perfect Scottish heroes and heroines is her confrontation Duncan MacGregor, a Scottish warrior from the Forty-Second Highland Regiment, who is a survivor of ninety battles—according to Dr. Fennel's account. What Fennel does not tell his daughter before the arranged meeting is the extent of his injuries. He is missing an arm, several toes on one foot, an eye, part of his nose and a chunk of his chin. His hair and mustache are unkempt and he smells of snuff. His accent is the thickest she had heard and is nearly undecipherable (Volume III, 76-78). Immediately upon meeting Alice, MacGregor tries to "imprint a kiss on her coral lips" whereupon Alice's runs to her father for protection. The assault on Alice's proclivity for Scottish characters is twofold. In addition to the visual assault of the greater-than-life MacGregor, Dr. Fennel reminds Alice what she has come to know about Scottish behavior from her reading. "Alice, I am ashamed of you: ought you not to know, with all your reading, and with all you have been taught, that the customs of different countries differ also from each other? And the kiss was offered you, in pure friendship, according to the custom of that of captain Macgregor" (Volume III, 78). Alice replies, "I do not wish to follow the customs of your country" (79). This real confrontation completes the final disassembly of Alice's romantic imaginations. She tells her maid, "I hate everything that is Scotch" and finally commands her, "Do take away those Scotch novels…I am quite weary of them" (Volume III, 85, 87).

Trials and Observation

Convinced that she will never love MacGregor, Alice offers to him instead her friendship. They spend several days together, during which she comprehends that MacGregor is more than the sum of his *missing* parts—she comprehends and appreciates his character and his gentleness. Green's authorial move here recapitulates Lennox's and Austen's. The cure for Alice is realizing that Scotch novels only represented types and patterns; as such, they were unsuitable for direct application to her prosaic world, but they could be valuable in pointing to the importance of true inner character. The narrator explains:

> She learnt much from him, and he had a method of teaching which rendered his instructions pleasing and easy. She grew ambitious of becoming an accomplished woman, and made great improvements, in the attention she paid to her new master, in geography, drawing, and the scientific part of music. (Volume III, 91)

He became her friend and tutor as well as an example of estimable character. She tells her father, "I esteem him and value his character far above all that I have ever seen among the gentlemen that you or my brother, Mr. Howard have introduced me to" (Volume III, 92). About this process of character revelation, April Alliston explains:

> All three primary Enlightenment narrative genres of novel, history, and romance, despite the theoretical distinctions between them, constructed plots designed to unfold truths of character. All construct what I've come to call "trials of character," where "trial" retains both the old romance and the religious sense of testing virtue by ordeal and the new Enlightenment one of gaining knowledge through experiment and empirical observation. In both these senses, "trials of character" are representations in the narrative about the epistemology of character as a temporal experience, about character as something hidden that requires a temporal process of revelation. (257)

Her analysis is particularly apt in describing Alice's growth in sophistication as she learns to read—novels, and more importantly, people—with greater accuracy. At their

parting Alice tells MacGregor, "I adore your virtues" (Volume III, 103). She also reflects, "All is not fable we read of in Scotch romances," and Alice wonders, "Is friendship […] so nearly allied to love, that I should feel the absence of Macgregor with that anguish I experience? I have been ever of the opinion that love takes place in our bosoms in a moment unlooked-for, without any particular proof of the beloved object's merit" (Volume III, 117).

At this moment in the novel, Green contemplates a new category of love. Alice realizes that a deeply rewarding friendship might be a more substantial basis for marriage than a momentary stirring of emotion. Green poses this question in her novel about the relationship to reading as well. She demonstrates that novel reading might be valued more for its personal subjective developmental than for its relatively transitory emotional thrill. It is through Alice's reading of Scotch novels that she first considers the positive behavioral traits that might compose a *hero*. While MacGregor shatters the external picture of a hero, he affirms the beauty of internal character. About the real MacGregor compared to fictional heroes, Alice concludes with this ode of realization:

> Oh, MacGregor! in spite of thy outward defects, thy mind is all, and more than even my fancy ever painted to be that of the most perfect northern hero, when my eye has wandered over the pages of the most enchanting writings that ever were penned; but the dream is over—the veil of illusion is drawn away, and thou has arrived too late! (Volume III, 205-6)

What is particularly innovative in Sarah Green's version of this tale of a woman's education and development is the huge trick she plays on Alice—and on the reader! Green reveals in the final pages of the novel that "Captain MacGregor" is actually Robert Butler in disguise—a masquerade that Robert agreed to at the request of Dr. Fennel. While the masquerade trope often appears at the beginning of a tale and generally

separates lovers, Green employs it at the end of her novel and makes it the tool of education and growth for Alice—and more significantly—for Robert. When Robert explains the ruse to Alice he tells her, "I owe it all to you, who inspired me with the ambition to appear, and really to become amiable in your eyes…God surely consecrated the heart of woman for the salvation of man" (Volume III, 240). This is a significant claim by Green. She suggests that Alice's time invested in novel reading not only benefited her, but that it in turn spurred Robert to become less condescending and more comforting. Not only does Green void the arguments against female novel reading, she suggests its positive benefits for women—and for men. She also suggests the character of women as being of a nature that saves men from their own errors and conceits. Alice Fennel becomes an early example of the "angel in the house" that will have many other avatars in nineteenth-century novels.

Reading's Effects – A Final Word

Having begun these analytical chapters with Johnson's critiques of the novel's power over readers expressed in *Rambler No. 4*, it is important to consider his later modified views on the same subject. After four years of creating 208 *Rambler* essays and 138 *Adventurer* essays, Johnson answers a question that was posed by one of his readers—"What have I been doing?" as a writer. In other words, is there any benefit to the reader of Johnson's essays? In *Adventurer No. 137*, Johnson reviews his own arguments against literature's propensity to harm individuals and society. He accedes to some points of that argument, but he argues from a new perspective that books do have a certain, though often immeasurable formative effect on readers. There is a progression in Johnson's opinions over time that parallels a similar progression in those authors who I

have analyzed in Chapters 2 through 5. It can be argued that Charlotte Lennox's and other mid-century authors' (male and female) novels provided credible arguments against Johnson's earlier beliefs, and that Johnson's own views had been altered by these novels.

James Engell devotes a chapter in *Forming the Critical Mind* to analyzing Samuel Johnson's developing literary criticism. Engell explains that a prominent feature of Johnson's essay is a propensity to argue both sides of an issue—equally well and convincingly. Engell explains, "Johnson would debate both sides of a question, talking Pro and Con on any issue, each time inhibiting in himself the ability to strike out the alternate conclusion with equal vigor" (Ibid). This double-sided argumentation is evidenced in Johnson's penultimate *Adventurer No. 137- Writers not a Useless Generation*. Several years after his strong warning against the dangers of novels, he offers a more moderate assessment of reading's effects:

> But, perhaps, it seldom happens, that study terminates in mere pastime. Books have always a secret influence on the understanding; we cannot at pleasure obliterate ideas; he that reads books of science, though without any fixed desire of improvement, will grow more knowing; he that entertains himself with moral or religious treatises, will imperceptibly advance in goodness; the ideas which are often offered to the mind, will at last find a lucky moment when it is disposed to receive them. (491)

Johnson acknowledges no definitive examples of the world being improved by his essays, but he also argues that he feels many have been influenced positively, and it is the readers' job to put whatever they have learned to use:

> For my part, I do not regret the hours which I have laid out on these little compositions. That the world has grown apparently better, since the publication of the *Adventurer*, I have not observed; but am willing to think, that many have been affected by single sentiments, of which it is their business to renew the impression; that many have caught hints of truth, which it is now their duty to pursue; and those who have received no improvement have wanted not opportunity but intention to improve. (492)

Johnson argues at the end of his essays that writings of all kinds have *potential* to shape readers' minds. At this later point in development of his ideas about reading's effects, he does not envision a cause-and-effect result from reading. Rather, he suggests that what is read occupies our thoughts and causes us to ponder; what occurs after the initial acquaintance with an idea depends on the intention and application of the reader, more than the power of the author's prose. It is this same conception of reading that is also presented by the four women authors I investigate in this dissertation. They, too, suggest that what we read "occupies our thoughts and causes us to ponder." What they would have readers ponder is the potential for positive impact on subjective development through the intellectual work that novels stimulate. In this assertion, their ideas seem progressive and precociously similar to Joshua Landy's proposition:

> There are texts we might label "formative fictions," texts whose function is to fine-tune our mental capacities…rather than teaching, what they do is train. They are not informative, that is, but formative….in the end, they help us become who we are. (10)

Future progress in understanding the relationship of reading on readers will be assisted most by assimilating and applying these ideas that the more enduring work of fiction is formative and that the ambiguity found in novels provides the kind of literary resistance to simplistic and naïve reading that stimulates these synthesizing exercises in readers.

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